

## Diversity of Roles Played by Aboriginal Men in Domestic Violence in Québec

*Domestic violence in aboriginal settings should not be seen in isolation from the history of colonisation of aboriginal peoples in Canada and the effects of this history on family structure. The few studies on the subject have focused mostly on women and social workers, with little documented evidence of the views and experiences of men. The small number of studies carried out among aboriginal men suggests that they tend to be seen as the main instigators of violence, leading inevitably to the perpetuation of mass incarceration. This article presents the results of a qualitative study conducted among 39 aboriginal men with experience of domestic violence living in Québec. Analysis of semi-structured interviews reveals the wide range of roles played by aboriginal men in incidents of domestic violence, and highlights the importance of focusing on interactional dynamics and the influence of a range of factors governing their experience, the wider aim being to break down the barriers between the different social measures targeting this population.*

**Keywords:** domestic violence, Aboriginal peoples, men, qualitative, Canada

There is much evidence that domestic violence is highly prevalent among aboriginal<sup>(1)</sup> families in Canada (Jones, 2008). Research shows that domestic violence is the costliest and most common social and economic problem in aboriginal communities (Bourque, 2008;

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<sup>(1)</sup> The term "aboriginal man" will be used here to refer to any man who defines himself as First Nation or Aboriginal. The sample population comprised men who see themselves as belonging to the Atikamekw or the Innu nation.

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Brownridge, 2003; LaRocque, 1994) and that it represents a grave threat to the general health and wellbeing of families (Bopp, Bopp & Lane, 2003). A recent study reported that 21% of Aboriginal people (24% of women, 18% of men) claimed to have been victims of violence at the hands of a current or previous spouse or common-law partner over a five-year period (Statistics Canada, 2009). It has also been shown that Canadian Aboriginal men are five times more likely to experience violence at the hands of an intimate partner compared to non-aboriginal men (Brownridge, 2010).

Despite this evidence, little research has been conducted on domestic violence among aboriginal couples, with very few studies focusing specifically on the experience of aboriginal men affected by this issue. Montminy, Brassard, Jaccoud, Harper, Bousquet and Leroux (2011) argued that the point of view and experience of men are “frequently overlooked and yet they should be seen as an integral part of the relational dynamics at the heart of domestic violence incidents” (p. 62). Research shows that focusing on the multiple experiences and realities of aboriginal men is critical if we want to reduce domestic violence among this population and promote the development of social measures that are more emancipating than mass incarceration (Flynn, Lessard, Montminy & Brassard, 2013). In short, all the evidence points to the importance of understanding the discourse of aboriginal men on domestic violence and the dynamic and interactional nature of domestic violence incidents.

It is also important to emphasize from the outset that domestic violence among aboriginal peoples cannot be understood without taking into account the broader historical and cultural context. In Canada, the process of colonization, accompanied by a range of assimilation policies, led to significant structural changes in traditional aboriginal families (Weaver, 2009). Aboriginal families tend to see colonization as having led to the loss of their land, autonomy and spiritual traditions, as well as having profoundly disrupted their social structures and domestic roles (Bopp & al., 2003; Jaccoud & Brassard, 2003; Weaver, 2009). In this sense, domestic violence appears to be a symptom of family deconstruction fed and sustained by a social environment promoting stereotypes that are demeaning to Canadian aboriginal peoples (Brownridge, 2003). As “both colonization and colonialism are [...] unique sociohistorical determinants that anchor transformations of sense of self and one’s view of one’s place” (Greenwood & De Leeuw, 2012, p. 382), the importance of conducting a qualitative study among aboriginal men in Quebec with experience of domestic violence is clear.<sup>2</sup> The present article describes one of the key subjective dimensions of men’s experience in this area: their diverse roles in domestic violence. Their roles are examined by considering the interactional nature of domestic violence in an aboriginal context. Below we aim to demonstrate how taking into consideration men’s perspectives and roles in domestic violence incidents opens the way for approaches other than the socio-judicial treatment of domestic violence.

<sup>2</sup> According to some researchers, discussions on the issue of domestic violence in Aboriginal settings tend to reinforce the negative stereotypes attached to Aboriginal men by wrongly shifting attention to them, or could be seen as a means of “relieving the government of its responsibility” (Innes, 2015, p. 47). The purpose of this research is not to point the finger at aboriginal men. Rather, the aim is to lift the veil on new dimensions that demonstrate the diverse and changeable nature of the roles played by aboriginal men in domestic violence. The wider aim is to broaden the range of social responses to domestic violence and, by extension, to reduce the emphasis on mass incarceration.



### FROM COLONIZATION TO CHANGING DOMESTIC ROLES

Studies of domestic violence in aboriginal couples have invariably found that violence is intimately linked to the history of colonization and poor living conditions (Hamby, 2000; Jones, 2008; Larocque, 1994). This issue must be seen against the backdrop of a broader context of social pressures brought about by the effects of assimilation policies imposed on aboriginal populations (Weaver, 2009). The rapid social upheavals experienced by aboriginal peoples as a result of colonization caused significant disruption in families. Before the arrival of the first Europeans, aboriginal men and women had distinct and defined roles and yet were considered complementary and equal (Montminy, Brassard et al., 2011; QNW, 2008). The imposition of the Euro-Canadian patriarchal model—a model in which men dominate, control access to resources, and are the main decision makers—brought about profound changes in aboriginal families (Weaver, 2009). The European patriarchal model contributed to entrenching the idea that a man must “be strong, must keep his feelings to himself, must never cry and must be the head of the family [...] while aboriginal culture tends to promote quiet strength, invulnerability, self-sufficiency and human dignity and respect” (ONWA, 1989, p. 27). Innes (2015) explores how race, gender, systemic racism, and the colonial legacy may explain the over-representation of Aboriginal men as both victims and perpetrators of violence. These factors are thought to have led to an increase in conflictual power relations between men and women, thereby contributing to the high levels of domestic violence observed in aboriginal communities (Snowball & Weatherburn, 2008). Duran and Duran (2000) note that the effects of colonization are particularly noticeable among men who, as warriors, were expected to repel oppressors and protect their families and communities. Gender studies in this area have also increasingly highlighted the devastating effects of colonization on men deprived of their status as leaders, role models, protectors and providers. Such effects include identity confusion (Reser, 1990a), men’s loss of their moral authority over their families (McKinley, 2014), post-traumatic stress disorder, loss of self-esteem, and a reduction in perceived control over their lives (Wesley-Esquimaux & Smolewski, 2004).

### ABORIGINAL MEN AND THEIR EXPERIENCE OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

It is widely recognized that aboriginal men with experience of domestic violence are a marginalized group. Discrimination and the social, political and economic conditions of aboriginal men mean a low socio-economic status, higher unemployment rates, and a general deterioration of living conditions (Bopp et al., 2003; Brownridge, 2003). It is also important to recognize the structures that created these poor living conditions, such as decision-making models imposed on Aboriginal peoples, the systemic abuses of power suffered by Aboriginal communities face, inequities in accessing preventative services, and imposed social programs that do not meet their needs (Loppie-Reading & Wien, 2009). The poor living conditions of aboriginal men with experience of domestic violence can also be seen by the high levels of alcohol and drug dependency (Jones, 2008), serving in particular to anesthetize the pain caused by poverty, racism (Rothe, 2005), and the structural and institutional violence affecting them (Wardman & Quantz, 2005). Identity confusion, social exclusion and geographical isolation—all consequences of colonization—are also characteristic of the life of aboriginal men with experience of domestic violence (QNW, 2008; Jones, 2008; Pharand & Rousseau, 2008).

A systematic literature review conducted by Longclaws and colleagues (1993) highlighted the paucity of information on aboriginal men. Twenty years on, little appears to have changed



(Montminy, Brassard et al., 2011). In fact, we reviewed six studies that have specifically examined the perspective and/or experience of men in this area. It is important to note that the samples used in the six reviewed studies reflected the discourse of men and other actors (such as women or aboriginal elders, foreign-born men, and/or individuals working with an aboriginal client base), which complicates the task of understanding the experience of aboriginal men involved in domestic violence. A major limitation of extant research in this area is that studies tend to be based on a preconceived notion of the role played by aboriginal men in domestic violence. This is the case with studies that examine men seen as witnesses of domestic violence (Cunningham, 2007; Montminy & Brassard, 2012; Sorensen, 1998). Although these studies are relevant to our understanding of the question addressed in this article, the studied populations are not directly involved in domestic violence as such, meaning that the perception they have of their roles is impossible to study. Other studies have sought to understand the experience of aboriginal men as perpetrators of domestic violence (Cheers et al., 2006; Comack, 2008; Task Force, 2003). As noted by Deslauriers and Cusson (2014, p. 142), studies that have focused on the experience of aboriginal men also *define them a priori* by assigning them a fixed role as perpetrators seeking to control their partner, despite the fact that statistics show that violence is primarily bilateral, that it is “seldom systematic and does not cause terror in victims on a daily basis”. Among recent studies of aboriginal men as instigators of domestic violence, the results of a study by Comack (2008) conducted on 19 incarcerated men (including 16 aboriginal men) found that a few participants saw their violent behavior as a strategy to regain power and control in their relationship. However, most of the participants viewed their violent behavior toward their partner as a response to their partner’s psychological or physical violence. Although the men evoke alternating interactional dynamics and roles in incidents of domestic violence, these elements of their discourse are interpreted by the author as “a tendency to downplay their own use of violence” (Comack, 2008, p. 105). With the exception of Montminy and Brassard (2012) who noted that domestic violence in aboriginal settings involves a wide variety of roles and dynamics, the discourse of aboriginal men on relational dynamics and the diversity of actor roles in domestic violence remains largely unexplored. This can be explained by the fact that studies that have focused on the discourse of men have generally sought to understand how they perceive their violent behavior without considering the broader context in which such incidents occur. Gender-focused theoretical approaches also fail to capture relational dynamics and the diversity of roles performed by each actor.

Though valuable and highly relevant, the reviewed studies provide no real insight into the changing nature of the roles performed by social actors involved in domestic violence. The trajectory of domestic violence and the diversity of roles have been largely overlooked in the literature. As mentioned by Innes (2015), “placing the emphasis on the violence of which indigenous men are capable while at the same time ignoring their victimization is caused by a specific kind of race and gender bias many white people have toward indigenous men.” (Innes, 2015: 51). As a result, part of the discourse of aboriginal men, especially victims of domestic violence, has been ignored, thus preventing a global understanding of the issue and impeding the development of new dimensions to better understand violence in aboriginal couples and meet the different needs of men, families and communities.

### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

There is no consensus in the literature on the definition of domestic violence (Chester, Robin, Koll, Lopez & Goldman, 1994). This study used the definition proposed in the 2012-



*2017 Government Action plan on domestic violence, Aboriginal component.* Domestic violence is defined as follows:

Domestic violence includes psychological, verbal, physical and sexual violence and acts of economic exploitation.... Domestic violence can be experienced in a marital, extra-marital or romantic relationship and at any age.... The issue of domestic violence in aboriginal settings extends beyond spousal relationships and requires a global approach targeting both couples and families. (Gouvernement du Québec, 2012, pp. 1, 24)

Violence in an aboriginal context extends beyond power inequality in a domestic relationship and needs to be considered as “a consequence of colonization, of forced assimilation and cultural genocide” (Green, 1996, p. 1). Violence is therefore viewed as the expression of a domestic conflict in which partners play diverse roles, the aim being to reflect the multiple experiences of aboriginal men without restricting them to a fixed or predetermined role. The concept of experience at the heart of research in this area is defined as a “way of feeling, of being overwhelmed by strong emotions while discovering a personal subjectivity. Experience is also a cognitive activity, a way of constructing reality and, above all, of verifying it and experimenting with it” (Dubet 1994, p. 128). The sociology of experience was used as the main disciplinary basis of the study in order to better capture the meaning given to these experiences by men, the contexts in which such experiences have occurred and the perceptions men have of their roles. The theoretical approach of the sociology of experience sees social actors as capable of determining the meaning of their actions and decisions (Dubet, 1994). “Social roles, social positions and cultural background no longer provide a stable basis for actions because social actors are not programmed in advance. Rather, they attempt to build unity from the diverse elements of their social experiences and from the wide range of potential orientations they have open to them” (Dubet 1994, p. 16). Particular importance was therefore given to the concept of role. This notion refers to the way in which actors behave in particular contexts—in this instance, the way aboriginal men behave in incidents of domestic violence. The sociology of experience is particularly relevant here since it encourages openness to the different roles that social actors may perform, thus providing a better understanding of domestic violence as a dynamic and interactional phenomenon.

#### DATA COLLECTION

The sample population was composed of 39 aboriginal men resident in Quebec, aged between 26 and 58 years old (mean age = 39) and with previous experience of domestic violence, whether as victims and/or instigators. The sample population included men from two aboriginal nations (Atikamekw and Innu) living in aboriginal communities. This choice was justified by the fact these two nations are particularly overrepresented in provincial prisons in Quebec for crimes related to violence against the person (Brassard, Giroux & Lamothe-Gagnon, 2011). Considering the prevailing social response to domestic violence for Aboriginal men is their prosecution and imprisonment, it seemed appropriate to proceed with the recruitment of the population in communities of those two nations. The participants were selected based on a range of criteria including age, education, family composition and types of domestic violence. Most of the participants had finished their secondary school, but very few had entered post-secondary education. As far as family com-

position is concerned, approximately half of the men who participated in this study were cohabiting and half were widowed or separated. Most of the participants had taken steps (formal therapies, spiritual healing, etc.) connected to domestic violence or other related difficulties (emotional dependency, alcohol or drug abuse, etc.). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant. Inductive content analysis was used to analyze the reported evidence and to identify areas of convergence and divergence (Deslauriers & Kérisit, 1997). All names below are pseudonyms.

## RESULTS

### The Contexts of the Experience of Domestic Violence Among Aboriginal Men

The perspective of aboriginal men with experience of domestic violence is heavily marked by a wide range of socio-cultural, structural and individual factors. Some men associate their experiences with these factors (residential school experiences, socio-economic context, forced assimilation, etc.), with perceived negative effects among aboriginal communities, within their families and in their personal life history. Violence is seen as a mode of conflict regulation that serves to express this negative emotional charge:

Our rights were completely ignored. Our race, our people! That's real violence. As they say, violence breeds violence. [...] They didn't show us any respect... And then they wonder why we have problems today... Just look at our history [...] White people put us in residential schools, there was terrible violence. Parents would spend two months a year with their children. It destabilized my family—it really didn't help. That's why I don't know how to behave around girls. I wasn't ever taught how to behave, so I never learned how to... (Sam, age 38)

The poor living conditions in certain communities are also evidenced by the limited activities and services supporting men affected by domestic violence:

A lot of people drink, because there's nothing to do in these communities, there are no jobs either. [...] You know, there aren't any services left. Before, we had a psychologist, now there aren't any. There's no work. There are lots of social problems in our communities.... Be it alcohol, violence, drugs, etc. It's hard to get by in a reserve when you're surrounded by calamities. (Rick, 36)

Aboriginal men also see domestic violence as a strategy for escaping unhappiness: most experience inner suffering for which they are unable to find an outlet. Several of the participants showed how they had sought for strategies and ways to escape their pain, causing them subsequently to behave aggressively toward their partners. Such was the case of Terry, who associated the abuse he had experienced as a child with his violent behaviors in his relationship, which he saw as a way of taking back control over his life:

When I was younger, I lived in an aboriginal community, I was taken in by social services, and I experienced all kinds of abuse ... especially sexual abuse. [...] When I left school, that's when I stopped using, then I realized I was missing something, a piece of the puzzle was missing. I didn't feel good in myself. I grew up like that, I fed the rage I had inside of me. I was violent, jealous and possessive with my partners. I think it's just that I'd had enough of losing things. (Terry, 29)



## The Roles of Aboriginal Men in Domestic Violence

The interviews conducted as part of this study highlighted the roles played by men in domestic violence incidents. Three specific role types were identified: men who were unable to define precisely their role, men as victims and men as instigators.

**Men unable to identify their role.** In most studies in this area (Jones, 2008) authors have argued that domestic violence in aboriginal settings is often closely linked to alcohol and drug abuse. Some of the participants lived in poverty and had a precarious socio-economic conditions, both of which are associated within increased alcohol and drug use. These factors cause stressful family environments and reduced social support (Loppie-Reading & Wien, 2009), two conditions which, among others, are known to be related to perpetuation of violent behaviors. Several of the participants had been under the influence during incidents of domestic violence. Participants like Chad for example, who had been in a state of severe intoxication at the time of the incident, claimed they were unable to describe the precise sequence of events, thus preventing them from identifying or defining their role. Some of the participants reported they had no clear memory of the incident:

All I remember is ... We were at the bar and her phone kept ringing, so I took it and ripped it in two [...] I was getting drunk, really drunk ... She told me [after the incident] that I hit her with a glass [...]. I woke up at the police station and I was still very intoxicated. I had burn marks on my arm too, you know, but I can't remember what happened or how it happened. (Chad, 32)

**Men as Victims.** One third of the participants defined themselves as victims of domestic violence, noting that they struggled to react and to defend themselves because of their belief that a man should not react physically to violent behavior from a woman:

She's a woman so I'm not allowed to hit her, whereas I was getting hit and getting hurt. [...] I got kicked in the ribs once and ended up with three broken ribs. I was out for the count from all the punches. She'd call the police, you get kicked out, then the police don't know what to do, people judge you and then they laugh in your face. [...] She's a woman, I can't touch her, but I get hit right left and center.... (Frank, 26)

Aboriginal men in the position of victim often claim to feel powerless in the face of their partner's violent behavior. Because of their perception of dominant aboriginal masculinities, they can neither retaliate nor call the police. The social context plays an important role in their experience of violence since as they feel unsupported by actual structures and fear becoming further victimized. These assumptions serve to keep them locked in violent relationships, thereby distancing them from support services and reinforcing the culture of silence surrounding domestic violence.

**Men as instigators.** A minority of participants recounted their experiences of domestic violence by describing themselves as the main instigators. Of all the men interviewed in this study, Mark and Dany were the only participants to acknowledge their responsibility as instigators of domestic violence incidents. During their time in prison, both men began a healing process in the course of which they were forced to admit responsibility for their actions.

This may have affected their actual perception of the roles played in domestic violence. According to their experience, violence was unidirectional and their violent behavior toward their partners is marked by psychological and physical control. From the outset they admitted their guilt and made no attempt to deny their responsibility in behaving violently toward their partner.

I was already subjecting her to psychological violence. [...] It got to the point where I wouldn't even let her leave the house on her own, I'd follow her wherever she went. [...] I did everything I could to try to distance her from her relatives. I needed to control her. "You belong to me". (Mark, 44)

Wait till tomorrow morning, you'll feel hungover, you'll be scared, I'll talk you into feeling guilty." As crazy as it sounds, that's how I worked. [...] I was able to make her feel guilty. I made her feel ashamed of herself. And I wanted to control her for another month; I'd managed to conquer her. [...] When she wasn't respecting the limits, my limits, I'd use my hands over her. [...] You know I was abandoned when I went in residential schools, then abandoned by my family [...]. It's like I needed to have control of something or someone in my life. "I won't let you go, you are mine". (Dany, 52)

The sense of control among aboriginal men may be linked to the socio-historical context experienced by them. Research has found that the many losses brought about by colonialism plays a role in their desire for control in their intimate relationships, with violent behavior being seen as an attempt to take control of their lives (O'Neil & Nadeau, 1999) and avoid being abandoned by their partners.

### **Interactional Dynamics: Changing Roles in Changing Situations of Domestic Violence**

Beyond the question of discourse, the results of this study suggest that men's experiences can be seen as part of a broader trajectory of domestic violence. Very few of the men studied had experienced one single incident of domestic violence. Consideration of the trajectory and temporal dimension of domestic violence highlights the importance of interactional dynamics between partners. Analysis of the discourse of participants also showed that their roles changed and shifted over time, depending on their healing process, the therapies used, their experience of incarceration, the nature of violence, their intimate partner, etc. The role played by aboriginal men in domestic violence is thus not fixed, with most men playing several roles depending on the incidents described and the relationships in which the incidents are inscribed.

**The alternation of instigator and victim roles.** The discourse of the majority of participants shows that the roles played by men mirror the roles of their partners. A number of experiences narrated during the interviews indicate that both partners frequently engage in verbal, psychological and/or physical violence:

We mainly shout at each other. It usually ends up with one of us storming out. [...] She used to threaten me.... Though I did too, it all depended on who did the storming out. [...] The same patterns just kept repeating themselves, whether it was her



or me who triggered things. [...] Sometimes, one of us would slap the other on the face. It went both ways. (Max, 47)

As illustrated by this extract, the description of the incidents recounted by most men indicates that domestic violence stems from a model of aggressive behavior in which men find themselves acting alternately as instigators and victims. Contrary to a number of studies premised on the assumption that men act as perpetrators (Cheers et al., 2006; Sorensen, 1998), analysis of the discourse of participants shows that there appears to be a dynamics within aboriginal couples in which both partners may act as instigators or victims.

**Men who respond to violence.** Some of the participants saw their violent behavior as a response to the physical and/or psychological violence exhibited by their partner. In their view, enduring psychological violence (particularly threats and jealousy) and being hit caused them to lose control and to resort to physical violence themselves, as explains Patrick:

She was jealous with me; I couldn't go out with friends without her following. [...] It went as far as her hitting me. She would scream and make threats ... there was a lot of violence, both physical and psychological [...]. She was always asking for money [...] and telling me I wasn't there enough for the kids, threatening me that she would leave with the kids. Then I would retaliate. If you're always on the receiving end and you keep holding it in, at some point you're going to lose it. So I pushed her onto the bed, because I just felt so badgered. I kept shouting at her that I couldn't take it anymore. [...] I raised my hand to hit her, but she was even worse before that, she just kept attacking me verbally and physically. (Patrick, 26)

For other men, such as Eric, the fact of experiencing forms of violence in one relationship causes reactive behaviors in subsequent relationships (inter-conjugal):

With her, I was the one who had to shut up. Sometimes my wife would beat me, and then people would ask me, "Who did that to you?" I never said it was my wife who did it; people would have called me a wuss. Strange life eh? That's just how it was. [...] It got to the point where I'd had enough of getting hit. So I left. [...] But if you get hit enough times, at some point you're bound to hit back. I inflicted the same treatment on another partner.... I did the same thing. It was my turn to be in control this time, and I wasn't going to let her walk all over me. (Eric, 29)

Judging by the description of several incidents of physical violence experienced by the participants, one could be forgiven for categorizing men as instigators. However, the participants' views of their role and the broader context of the incidents suggest an interpretation of their behavior as a form of legitimate self-defense in relationships in which their partners can sometimes act as instigators. The events reported by the participants suggest that any analysis of incidents involving domestic violence must take into account the broader context and the discourse of the social actors involved in addition to looking at the broader set of circumstances leading up to such incidents (psychological violence exhibited by the partner, jealousy, affective dependency, money difficulties, parental conflicts, etc.).

**From the perception of being a victim to instigator.** Several participants reported that their perception of the role they played in incidents of domestic violence had changed as a result

of life experiences such as time spent in a formal institutional setting (imprisonment, therapy) during which they had learned to take responsibility for their actions. The account given by Serge highlights a shift in his perceived role as a victim toward an increased awareness of his responsibility as an instigator:

I used to say to myself, "it's all her fault, it's nothing to do with me". [I used to think] it was all her fault, and I thought it was really unfair that I had to go to prison. But then it slowly dawned on me: I had seriously injured someone, I could have strangled her, or I could have killed her; all sorts of scenarios were going through my head. [...] Today, I acknowledge and accept the fact that I'm an assailant. [...] I had a problem, I presented a danger to society and to myself, and the police put me in a safe place. [...] I could have killed someone, I could have killed myself—things could have gotten even worse. (Serge, 39)

The perceived roles of instigator and victim are thus not fixed or permanent and may change over time and through life experience. Imprisonment, therapy and spiritual experiences appear to be conducive to moving from a perceived role as victim to a greater awareness of instigation.

**From instigator to victim.** Two examples will be used to illustrate the shift from instigator to victim. First, analysis of the trajectories of domestic violence for some of the participants shows that some men move from instigator to victim within the same relationship (intra-domestic), after engaging in a personal healing process:

At the beginning of the relationship I was jealous and impatient, I drank heavily and I was often violent; my aggressive behavior got the better of me. [...] Since undergoing therapy I've become a different person. I've become the new Derek. I've worked really hard on my negative behavior, on my impatience, and my aggressiveness.... I don't have a drinking problem anymore. I became aware of all the bad things I had done. [...] Rather than running away from situations I stick things out. [...] The other day my partner was talking nonsense and all of a sudden she hit me with a broom handle. She just kept pushing me, pulling my hair and punching me on the shoulder. [...] My instinct was to put my hands in my pockets. All I could think was 'it must make her feel good to hit me'. I said to myself, "wow, I've changed so much!" (Derek, 26)

Although this excerpt shows positive changes in his behavior, Derek was able to justify his partner's violent behaviors by indicating that he understood the reasons underlying her aggressiveness. Following therapy, several of the men interviewed in this study perceived themselves to be instigators of violence and fully inhabited the role, even when they had in fact been victims.

Second, some aboriginal men also moved from being instigators in one relationship to being victims in a subsequent relationship (inter-conjugal). For example, Mark recounted the experience of violence in his first relationship, in which he clearly acted as the instigator:



I beat my wife and manipulated her for years [...] I was the one hurting my wife, not the other way round [...] I would beat her every evening without showing the slightest respect. (Mark, 44)

After serving time in prison for violent behavior, Mark engaged in a spiritual healing process and learned to manage his anger more effectively by coming to terms with his history of abuse. However, in a subsequent relationship Mark claimed he was never violent but on the contrary was on the receiving end:

She would say nasty things about me in front of everybody and I became a laughing stock to the world. [...] She was violent toward me, she beat me. [...] She'd begin by punching me in the face and giving me black eyes... it often happened. I didn't reply, I've learned to control myself and keep the anger inside. (Mark, 44)

Both examples show that it is critically important to take into account the different roles aboriginal men may undertake in domestic violence before developing appropriate tools and resources for intervention measures.

### CONCLUSION

Since the late 1960s, aboriginal men have been overrepresented in prisons in Quebec and in Canada more generally, and are commonly found committing offences involving their partner (Mann, 2009). Incarceration rates have increased consistently over recent years, and penal institutions have tended to use a discourse that emphasizes individualism and responsabilisation that views men as the instigators of domestic violence and women as the victims. From the results of this study, it is clear that this formal treatment does not truly reflect the diverse and interactional nature of domestic violence among aboriginal couples. The analysis showed that most of the participants described their experiences of domestic violence as stemming from interactive and conflict-based dynamics in which the roles played by men change according to the incidents described or the relationship in which the incidents occur. The collected data also show how the roles of aboriginal men in domestic violence have changed over time and vary in different relationships. If it is safe to assume that the violence experienced in aboriginal couples is context-dependent, interactive and reciprocal, it would seem necessary and urgent to change current policies and practices aimed at prevention and intervention in this area. The current practice of mass incarceration prevents aboriginal men (and indeed women) from escaping the vicious circle of domestic violence, and there are at present very few preventive measures in place. At best, prison provides a punitive and vindictive solution, particularly as the principles and procedures of the penal system are at odds with aboriginal laws and customs (Office of the Correctional Investigator, 2012). Data generated in the course of the present research suggest that it is important to steer clear of any attempt to generalize the phenomenon of violence to avoid stigmatizing aboriginal men and defining them solely as assailants.

Given this, it is clear that we need to develop alternative ways of understanding the problem of, and responses to, domestic violence in aboriginal settings. It is also important to take a temporal, global and systemic approach to domestic violence by taking into account the heterogeneity of situations, dynamics and contexts informing this issue. The scale of the issue of violence in aboriginal couples also underlines the need to take action and to provide appropriate support to men to encourage them to stop engaging in violent behavior

and offer help when they are victims of violence. Given that the roles of instigator and victim are often interchangeable in domestic violence, couple or family therapies may be one avenue to explore for aboriginal couples, particularly since aboriginal women appear willing to take part in joint and family (as opposed to one-to-one) psychosocial interventions (Montminy, Brassard et al., 2011; Pharand & Rousseau, 2008). Taking into account the perspectives of aboriginal men and the many roles played in incidents of domestic violence would also allow stakeholders to adjust their decision-making process and develop solutions that reflect this diversity, by promoting conflict regulation and family healing models that are more flexible and that take account of the historical-cultural dimensions and relational dynamics of aboriginal couples.

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**Exhibit: National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls**

Location/Phase: parts 2/3: Quebec

Witness: Renée Brassard

Submitted by: Bernard Jacob

Add'l info: K02-03402 P0401

Date: SEP 20 2018

Initials

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