

Native American Healing Practices and Counseling

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An experiential Native American healing practices course, cotaught by a Native American pastoral counselor and a counselor educator, was offered to graduate counseling students to help them better understand Native American worldviews. A student participant's reflections are included. Students attended Native American ceremonies and learned through readings, lectures, and discussions.

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Traditional Western perspectives of human development and counseling have tended to be linear and reductionistic, overlooking holistic perspectives. Native American healing practices offer a circular and holistic model for understanding human issues. The model of organization is the medicine wheel, from which counselors and others can examine diverse dimensions of the human condition. This article describes a graduate-level counseling class offered to familiarize budding counselors with some perspectives of Native American healing practices through direct experiences as well as discussions and readings.

Although there is certainly great diversity among the more than 500 Native American tribes (Helms & Cook, 1999), there are some similarities as well that can be discussed without stereotyping, especially as long as one remembers that there can be variation from tribe to tribe as to the exact way in which some of the concepts are described and used. The class was offered with the hopes that students might deepen their understanding of Native American worldviews and add to their ability to shift perspectives to consider counseling issues in culturally relevant ways. The class was the result of a collaboration between a counselor educator (the first author) and a Native American spiritual and community leader who is also a pastoral counselor and ordained United Methodist minister (the second author). In this article, the experiences of a participant are told from the perspective of a student (the third author).

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NATIVE AMERICAN VIEWS OF THE HEALING PROCESS

One of the common Native American perspectives on health and healing has to do with the power of a harmonious relationship with nature. From this perspective, life is a whole, which cannot be artificially divided into categories but must be considered with all the interrelationships within nature. Disharmony with nature is unhealthy. Native American rituals are designed to restore harmony and thus health for those who might suffer (Thomason, 1991). The medicine wheel is one Native American symbol expressing the concept of harmony with nature.

After taking this class, the student author realized that many Native American concepts align very closely with her worldview, even though she had been unaware of this before taking the class. This was especially true with regard to the love of nature and the association of harmony and nature. For her, nature generally has a calming and peaceful effect, whereas disharmony feels like being in a storm. Nature can offer one a sense of peace, both outside and inside. This peaceful feeling stands in contrast to the storm of disharmony that occurs when people abuse nature and show disrespect for the earth that maintains us.

THE MEDICINE WHEEL

The circle is a key symbol in Native American philosophy and is sacred in Native American spirituality. The circle represents the never-ending cycle of life, death, and rebirth (Garrett, 1998). The circle is used as sacred space in a number of ways in Native American culture: the dance arena at powwows, the spirit fire, the shape of the sweat lodge as well as the physical arrangement of participants within the sweat lodge, and the medicine wheel.

The medicine wheel offers a physical, spiritual, and conceptual method of orienting to the four compass directions and the different dimensions in life represented by the four directions. Associations may vary from nation to nation, but it is helpful to look at a typical example. One common interpretation is described. The East is associated with the spiritual and the color red. The South is associated with the natural environment and the color yellow. The West is associated with the physical body and the color black. The North is associated with the mind and the color white (Coggins, 1990; Garrett, 1998).

Both during class and working outside of class, students constructed a large medicine wheel on the ground and blessed it with tobacco, sage, and sweet grass. While students were making the medicine wheel, the instructors described the symbolism involved. Later students made their own personal medicine wheels on large posters. The student author found this experience to be very powerful and has revisited it from time to time. For each of the sections related to physical, spiritual, emotional, and intellectual aspects, students identified personal symbols to represent the significance of those aspects of their lives. For the physical aspect, the student au-

thor outlined her hand to represent growth, health, and physical agility. For the spiritual aspect, her symbols were flames, a spirit bird, and hands for praying. Emotional symbols included tears, the sun, and a cat for comfort. The intellectual aspect was represented by a wise owl, books for learning, and a lantern to light the way. As the student author revisits her medicine wheel, she thinks of deeper meanings for her symbols and how these deeper meanings relate to growth and to nature. The spirit bird can also be the doves she feeds daily in her backyard but also represents the Holy Spirit. The book represents the knowledge she is learning to be able to counsel those in need. The owl she can hear at night and think of its wisdom.

RENAMING

Understanding the identity of others more fully requires counselors to be willing to step outside all the many roles that are a part of their everyday life. An important contributor to identity is one's name. To assist counselor trainees in making these kinds of shifts, they were asked to choose a new name based on nature and their own individual characteristics (Garrett & Crutchfield, 1997). Additionally, renaming can help to connect one more strongly to the world of nature and to ground one more completely to Mother Earth (McGaa, 1990).

One student was surprised at the ease with which she was able to come up with the name "gentle breeze." She felt that this name well represented her gentleness in her work, but it also suggests possible shifts in direction as the breeze changes. The student became aware that "Gentle breeze will also help me remember to gently change techniques with clients. I will be able to facilitate change in both the counselor and the client."

THE PIPE CEREMONY

Black Elk (Brown, 1953) described how a holy woman, White Buffalo Cow Woman, first gave the sacred pipe to the Lakota. The pipe was made up of a red stone bowl, a wooden stem, and 12 eagle feathers. The red stone represented the Earth, the wooden stem stood for that which grows on the Earth, and the eagle feathers symbolized the eagle and other beings of the air. The pipe helps to connect individuals to the whole, to make them holy. Tobacco and sacred herbs are smoked through the pipe, and the smoke serves as a prayer or connector to the upper reaches of the cosmos.

The pipe serves as one of the most significant symbols and sacred objects for the Lakota. The sacred pipe is used in seven Lakota rites, including the keeping of the soul, *Inipi* or sweat lodge, *Hanblecheyapi* or crying for a vision, *Wiwanyag Wachipi* or the sun dance, *Hunkapi* or the making of relatives, *Ishna Ta Awi Cha Lowan* or preparing a girl for womanhood, and *Tapa wanka Yap* or the throwing of the ball. It was not appropriate or necessary for the students to participate in each of these rites. However, the students were able to observe a pipe ceremony conducted by a man recognized as pipe carrier in the

Lakota tradition. This gave the students the opportunity to experience the reverence placed on the pipe and the ceremonies with which it is used.

The experience of the pipe ceremony and learning about the different pipe components were insightful. Again, a strong connection was made to nature. A high level of sacredness and reverence was felt for the pipe and what it represents as the pipe carrier explained its purpose. The student author felt privileged just to be able to hold the pipe; instead of smoking the pipe, one could hold it to one's forehead and offer a prayer. She also felt that her prayer rose in the smoke from the pipe to God in heaven. The blending of nature, sacredness of the pipe, and the spirit world of her prayer rising in the smoke had a spiritual power of holiness and a feeling of peace.

THE POWWOW

The powwow serves Native Americans in a number of ways. It has a social function in bringing people of one or more tribes together from distant places. It has a profoundly spiritual function in that dance, drumming, and singing are brought together to celebrate life and relationship to the Earth (Garrett, 1998). It also has an educational function in helping people learn more about Native American heritage and ceremony. Garrett and Wilbur (1999) described how different individuals tend to experience a powwow at different personal levels of feeling, oftentimes involving social aspects, but many times involving unique individual experiences as well. Another of the counseling students in the class, who also happened to be a member of the U.S. Army Reserves, expressed a deep honor that she experienced as a veteran invited to join in a particular powwow dance.

The ceremonial dress, ritual dances, and music were indescribable. The air was charged with the pride of the people participating in the powwow. One dance was an open invitation to all in attendance and brought many students into the circle to dance. With the encouragement to join in, the student author felt as if she belonged, and it was great, even without knowing the verbal meaning of the words used in the chants. The powwow was rich in tradition, and the pride of the culture was very evident. When she was invited to participate in one of the dances, she felt as though she was a part of this culture. All were as one.

THE TALKING CIRCLE

Because the circle is a key concept within the Native American perspective and represents a reverence for Mother Earth, the talking circle follows as a way of gathering and organizing discussions in a very respectful way (Garrett, 1998; Garrett & Crutchfield, 1997). A *talking stick* may be used to clearly indicate that the person with the stick has permission to speak. A talking stick can be a carved or otherwise decorated piece of wood. The leaders begin the session by expressing their views and feelings, then by passing the talking

stick to the person on their left, continuing around the circle until everyone has had a chance to share his or her ideas.

INIPi: THE SWEAT LODGE

The *inipi* or sweat lodge serves as a rite of purification (Brown, 1953). The *inipi* is carefully constructed of a covered frame of 12 to 16 willow branches oriented to the four directions. The door, which is a flap that can be closed during the ceremony, faces the East as a source of enlightenment. The *inipi* itself symbolizes a microcosm of the universe. A sacred fireplace is constructed outside the *inipi* where stones can be heated for the ceremony. The stones represent Mother Earth from which life arises, and the fire represents the rays of the sun that bring life to the Earth. Inside the *inipi* at the very center, an altar is constructed where the heated rocks are placed. Water is poured over the heated rocks to create steam. Sage or sweetgrass is sprinkled on the rocks to create an aromatic effect within the lodge (Brown, 1953). For purposes of this class, students were able to view and enter an *inipi* and learn about its significance and uses, but they did not actually participate in a ceremonial sweat.

Students greatly enjoyed the opportunity to visit a sweat lodge. Although it was not in use at the time, the chance to enter a sweat lodge was described by one student as "awesome." The keeper of the fire told stories about how it was used. Storytelling is a wonderful custom that is passed down from one generation to the next. The fire keeper gave each student a gift of a leather pouch with tobacco as they left. The student author recalled,

Entering the sweat lodge I had mixed feelings. The wonder of being able to enter another sacred tradition but at the same time a sadness that I don't feel I would have the stamina to participate in a sweat lodge ceremony because of my own feeling of weakness and personal unworthiness. The leather pouch I have used for my prayers. Combining the two traditions gives me a sense of calmness and spiritual peace.

A trained substance abuse counselor with a Lakota background spoke with the class about his experiences with other Native Americans in finding that the *inipi* provided a helpful approach in working with substance abuse issues. He spoke of how the sacred darkness within the *inipi* provided a nonjudgmental atmosphere where individuals could reflect on their lives and the role that substances may have played in their lives.

METHOD OF TEACHING

The method of teaching in this class was predominantly experiential, with group participation, discussion, readings, and individual research and writing. The primary learning concept used was one of *praxis*, or reflection-on-action (Russell-Chapin, Rybak, & Copilevitz, 1996; Saul, 1990). Field trips included opportunities for students to join in a powwow, to visit a Native

American's backyard sweat lodge, and to experience a pipe ceremony. In addition to observing a Native American ceremony, students were asked to choose and report on a Native American healing practice, ritual, or ceremony and to consider possible linkages to counseling issues. Examples of Native American healing practices that students reported on included the sun dance (*wiwanyag wachipi*), crying for a vision (*hanblecheyapi*), the medicine wheel, the recovery medicine wheel, the ghost dance, sacred clowns, herbal remedies and counseling implications, the sweat lodge ceremony (*inipi*), and natural healing. Through these reports, students were able to express a beginning level of understanding of Native American healing practices.

As a concluding activity, students were asked to express their learning experience through a personal creation for class, such as a shield or mandala. Shields and mandalas can be representations of the medicine wheel as understood through the student's worldview. Just as is the medicine wheel, mandalas are sacred circles, and they also represent healing, inclusion, and integration of diverse elements within one's personality through an intuitive process unique to each student (Cornell, 1994) but promoted through a guided visualization process (Arguelles & Arguelles, 1972).

This class offered many rich experiences. Being able to experience a powwow and a pipe ceremony and enter a sweat lodge is much better than just reading about them. The assignment of selecting and reporting on a Native American healing practice led to research and learning about sacred clowns and other aspects of Native American culture that were previously unfamiliar to students. The importance of humor was also a significant part of the learning experience. The similarities and congruencies between student views and Native American concepts of culture (i.e., love of nature, the lack of importance of material things, reverence for elders, and the multiple roles of storytelling and rituals) were quite evident. The class allowed students to learn about acceptance and respect and stimulated a new willingness to step out of a familiar culture to facilitate learning and growth. It was a learning with the heart as well as with the head. The hands-on approach created memorable experiences as well as a hunger for wanting to learn more. Each class facilitated the growth of the students by taking them out of their comfort zones and encouraging them to embrace new experiences. In addition, the student author now has a better understanding of the challenges and struggles endured by Native Americans.

For the counselor educator coteaching this course, teaching through an experiential method offered a robustness to this course that simply would not be available using a more traditional didactic method. Students were able to partake of an experiential opportunity to open themselves emotionally to the deeper meanings of Native American ceremonies so that they could move beyond just facts to become more fully aware of the ceremonies. Facts can only take one so far when trying to understand another person's experience, especially when that person's cultural background is significantly different. Facts without understanding can easily become stereotypes or assumptions about another person's experience. Through the experiential

teaching method, students were offered an alternative way to approach the understanding of a differing perspective of reality from inside the experience rather than from a distance, which is detached and thereby disconnected. "At the phenomenal level, to experience something is to know it in a different way than to know it via thought or conceptualization. Experiencing is a way of knowing that is immediate, embodied, holistic, and contextual" (Bohart, 1993, p. 52). Experiencing offers a richly paved path toward integration and holistic understanding. Experiential activities offer students a means to access creative inner resources to enhance their own sense of wholeness (Rybak & Russell-Chapin, 1998).

APPLICATIONS TO COUNSELING

Moore (1992) described the common Western way of trying to understand non-Western perspectives through some kind of quasi-anthropological framework as often being cold and soulless. As a result, information is taken in a most superficial way with no real impact on the person receiving the information. Heart is not involved in the process as a distancing is practiced. With regard to counseling, this approach does not allow the counselor to understand the client's worldview, and the counseling relationship is severely limited. A greater opening of the counselor to the client's world contributes to an effective counseling relationship in which the counselor has a greater understanding of the client's perspective. The format of this class was intended to help counselors-in-training learn about Native American healing practices on an emotional level as well as on a cognitive level. Affect is a key to understanding Native American views and spirituality (Garrett & Wilbur, 1999).

Garrett and Wilbur (1999) described medicine, harmony, relation, and vision as key aspects of Native American spirituality. Medicine has to do with the aliveness of everything. Harmony includes the view that everything has purpose. Relation is important in that all things are connected. Vision includes the ability to respect the medicine of all things. Vision in this sense relates directly to counseling and the ethics of counseling because it has to do with acceptance, respect for autonomy, and willingness to step outside of one's own experience to try to understand another's experience without superimposing one's own values, beliefs, and perspectives. A counselor who has at least a basic understanding of these aspects is more likely to be able to work effectively with a range of Native American clients and to gain a fuller understanding of other aspects of their experiences. In their article, Garrett and Wilbur stressed the necessity of counselors being able to assess the level of acculturation of Native American clients so that they can more likely understand what degree of importance these concepts may have for particular Native American clients. As with other counseling relationships, the establishment of trust sets the tone for the counseling relationship and affects the quality of outcomes for the client. Counselor awareness of client culture can enable the counselor to honor and show respect for clients in ways that are relevant and familiar to the client.

CONCLUSION

The teaching of the Native American healing practices and counseling model described in this article was based on a praxis model of learning and includes the direct involvement of Native Americans in interactions with students. In this way, sacred and sensitive aspects of Native American spirituality were described and approached in a respectful manner, and students learned about these aspects from the perspective of those who have lived these principles. Students who desired to learn more about counseling Native Americans were afforded opportunities to learn through readings, discussions, and direct experience. The experiential teaching method demonstrated to students that they could approach other cultures with respect and sensitivity and could be invited across some thresholds of awareness.

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