An Aboriginal Worldview of Helping:
Empowering Approaches

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ABSTRACT

Euro-Canadian interventions have not successfully addressed the socio-economic problems experienced in Aboriginal communities as a result of years of colonization. Leading up to the new millennium, cultural forces have started to shift, and Euro-Canadian counsellors, therapists, and other helpers began to respond more effectively to the needs of Aboriginal peoples. A number of Aboriginal groups and communities took leadership by developing their own holistic approaches to healing/wellness, based on their worldviews. A reflection on this process with an awareness of Aboriginal worldviews and cultural imperatives offers possible approaches which facilitate empowerment in working with Aboriginal communities and Aboriginal clients.

RÉSUMÉ

Les interventions eurocanadiennes n'ont pas réussi à résoudre les problèmes socio-économiques vécus par les communautés autochtones suite à des années de colonisation. À l'approche du nouveau millénaire, une évolution des forces culturelles émergeant, les conseillers, thérapeutes et autres professionnels aidants eurocanadiens ont commencé à répondre plus efficacement aux besoins des peuples autochtones. Un certain nombre de groupes et de communautés autochtones ont pris la tête du mouvement en élaborant leurs propres conceptions de guérison/ bien-être basées sur leur vision du monde. Une réflexion sur ce processus accompagnée d'une compréhension des visions du monde et des impératifs culturels tels que ressentis par les autochtones présente d'éventuelles approches qui facilitent la prise en main personnelle dans le travail avec les communautés et clients autochtones.

Aboriginal peoples in Canada have ancient culture specific philosophical foundations and practices which continue to provide them with guidance in everyday life. In their healing process these imperatives provide guidance to those who experience physical, psychological, emotional, or spiritual distress — individually, in a family, or in a community. The purpose of this article is to provide some understanding of these foundations and practices and to offer some frameworks and practical suggestions about working with Aboriginal clients. The context of this article is based predominantly on the Prairies; however, the core principles relevant to the empowering approaches discussed here can be generalized to other regions.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Prior to contact with Euro-cultures and colonizers, indigenous nations in Canada had social, political, economic, and cultural structures which emerged from their specific worldviews (Charter, Hart, & Pompana, 1996; Hamilton & Sinclair, 1991; Miller, 1997). Most of these structures and perspectives were gradually eroded or replaced through structural and cultural colonization (Kellough, 1980). Canadian governments utilized the educational system to undermine the tribal system, social organization, religion, health systems, forms of leadership, and economic systems of the Aboriginal peoples. Eventually, these groups found themselves dependent upon provincial services such as welfare, health care, and education, as well as the federal government in order to pay for these services (Tobias,1990).

The loss of social and kinship structures, including gender, parenting, and social role models, has resulted in a sense of anomie and nemesis for many Aboriginal peoples (Charter et al., 1996; Miller, 1997). In turn, those negative influences have resulted in the marginalization and clientization of these groups in contemporary society (Charter et al., 1996). Systemic racism in social, medical and educational systems continues to reinforce the assimilation and integration of Aboriginal peoples into general Canadian population.

Despite overwhelming social, political, economic, and cultural domination and continual interference from Canadian governments and institutions, Aboriginal peoples have managed to maintain core aspects of their cultures and begin the process of reclaiming autonomy and self-government. An understanding of traditional worldviews and cultural imperatives by the general Canadian population, and particularly those who work with Aboriginal clients, is an important step towards de-colonization and facilitation of empowerment.

WORLDVIEWS

Worldviews emerge from the totality of peoples' social, political, economic, cultural and spiritual perceptions and beliefs. Ermine (1995) defines Aboriginal and Western worldviews as "diametric trajectories in the realm of knowledge" (p. 101). He describes Aboriginal worldviews as founded on a search for meaning from a metaphysical, implicit, subjective journey for knowledge based on the premises of "skills that promote personal and social transformation; a vision of social change that leads to harmony with rather than control over the environment; and the attribution of a spiritual dimension to the environment" (p. 102). He contrasts it with the Western worldview of the physical, explicit, scientific and objective journey for knowledge. Ermine (1995) draws upon Engels' (1893) false consciousness concept and says: "the Western world has capitulated to a dogmatic fixation on power and control at the expense of authentic insights into the nature and origin of knowledge as truth" (p.102). It is not surprising that the two worldviews often clash with one another.

"At a fundamental cultural level, the difference between traditional Aboriginal and Western thought is the difference in the perception of one's relationship with the universe and the Creator" (Hamilton & Sinclair, 1991, p. 20). Euro-Christian Canadians believed that they were meant to dominate the Earth and its creatures. The Aboriginal peoples believed that they were the least important creatures of the universe and that they were dependent upon the four elements (fire, water, earth and air) and all of creation for survival (Hamilton & Sinclair, 1991). For many Aboriginal peoples today, this belief system continues to be the framework from which they live their lives. Others do not accept traditional worldviews any longer, and some are returning to traditional ways seeking meaning and harmony in their lives.

Traditional philosophies are presented by elders and traditional teachers via the Medicine Wheel in conjunction with ceremonies (Charter, 1994: Regnier 1995). Cultural imperatives are learned, integrated and applied as a result of learning traditional teachings and participating in ceremonies, and through the modelling of appropriate behaviours in everyday life.

Medicine Wheel

Traditional Aboriginal peoples perceive life as a gift from the Creator. They understand that they have a responsibility to nurture and care for that gift at a personal and collective level. They were also granted medicines, sacred ceremonies, elders, traditional healers or medicine people, and sacred teachings such as the Medicine Wheel to help maintain or restore life to balance and harmony. A good life, or good health, is perceived to be a "balance of physical, mental, emotional and spiritual elements. All four interact together to form a strong, healthy person. If we neglect one of these elements we get out of balance and our health suffers in all areas" (Malloch, 1989, p.106).

The Medicine Wheel, The Wheel of Life, The Circle of Life, and The Pimaatisiwin Circle are symbolic expressions of similar, ancient, and sacred Aboriginal concepts; they are the philosophical foundations from which similar cultural imperatives emerge. These concepts are symbolic cyclical interpretations of life and universal connectedness which provides a means for individuals to make sense of their world. Regnier (1995) states that the symbolism represents unity, interdependence and harmony among all beings in the universe and identifies time as the continual recurrence of natural patterns.

Williams (1989) prefers the Anishinabe (Ojibwa) term of the Pimaatisiwin Wheel, and she describes "the search for pimaatisiwin" (p.49) as "the aim and hope of living a Good Life on this Earth" (p.49). Her description of the Pimaatisiwin Wheel states:

> The four directions, North, East, South and West, are represented respectively by the colours white, red, yellow and blue. Within these colours are the four races of Man: the White Man, the Red Man, the Yellow Race, and the Black Race; the four Life-givers: air, food, sun, and water; the four seasons: winter, spring, summer, and fall; the four vices: greed, apathy, jealousy, and resentment; the four moral principles; caring, vision, patience, and reasoning. The

North gives us the rocks, which speak to us of strength. The East gives us the animals, which talk to us about sharing. From the South we get the trees, which teach us about honesty, and from the West we are given the grasses, which teach us about kindness. All things in this Life were, and are, given to us the Mother of us all. Our Mother the Earth. (p. 49)

Healing, the quest for balance and restoration of harmony, is understood to include either three aspects of the person, the body, mind and spirit (Williams, 1989) or four aspects of a person, the physical, the emotional, the intellectual, and the spiritual (Absalon, 1993; Bopp, Bopp, Brown, & Lane, 1988; Regnier, 1995). These teachings are both secular and spiritual, and interwoven to include all aspects of life. "This holistic and earth centred philosophy of life and healing can apply to a variety of systems including the family and the environment" (Absalon, 1993).

Malloch (1989) describes the roles of elders in relation to healing and helping:

The term 'Elder' is used to describe someone who has knowledge and understanding of the traditional ways of his or her people, both the physical culture of the people and their spiritual tradition. An Elder may be a traditional healer also, but is not necessarily one. While an Elder is generally an older person with a rich life experience, he or she need not be Elderly in order to gain that position of respect within the community. It is a person's knowledge and wisdom, coupled with the recognition and respect of people in the community, which are the important criteria in the definition of an Elder (p. 107).

Today, the role of Elders is being reaffirmed as a key aspect in the holistic healing approach.

The Medicine Wheel philosophy includes all stages of human development from birth to death and rebirth. It connects all stages with each other, with all living beings, and with all life in the universe, thus providing a place of centring for each person in the cosmos. An understanding of the Medicine Wheel is a starting point for helpers as well as those seeking healing.

Cultural Imperatives

All traditional Aboriginal cultures have specific cultural imperatives which influence their actions and beliefs. Due to the diversity of indigenous nations, there is a diversity in the order of importance of cultural imperatives; however, there is a common base of values which should not be indiscriminately applied to all indigenous nations (Hamilton & Sinclair, 1991). Developing an in-depth understanding and respect for the values, beliefs, and practices of Aboriginal peoples in a specific geographical area is vital to supportive healing practice.

"Cultural imperatives such as non-interference, sharing, non-competitiveness, acceptance of responsibility for one's actions, the distancing of problems, and acknowledgement of the wisdom of all are expressed through the Medicine Wheel teachings" (Charter, 1994, p. 4). In addition, these cultural imperatives are reinforced through ceremonies, teachings and behaviours of elders, traditional medicine men and women, family members, and community role models and norms. The methods used by Aboriginal communities today frequently reflect traditional approaches to supporting and/or healing of their members.

TRADITIONAL APPROACHES TO SUPPORT AND HEALING

It is important to understand that there are no 'fixed' Aboriginal approaches to support and healing. Rather, each nation or cultural grouping identifies their own healers and defines their healing process (Malloch, 1989). Generally, however, the approaches to healing have emerged from cultural imperatives, and these values have remained intact and accepted by individuals and tribal groupings. Non-interference, non-competitiveness, desire for harmony within the group and/or community, acceptance of responsibility for one's actions, acknowledgement of the wisdom of others, distancing of problems, emotional restraint, and sharing are among some of the most important values (Brant, 1990; Hamilton & Sinclair, 1991). Storytelling, teaching and sharing circles, participation in ceremonies, and role modelling are among traditional Aboriginal approaches to helping and healing.

Story Telling

Story telling is one of the most effective and influential ways of incorporating many cultural values (Charter, 1994; Dion Buffalo, 1990; Tafoya, 1989). It provides a venue for sharing information and non-interfering problem solving, it helps the listener understand how to accept responsibility for their actions and how to acknowledge the wisdom of others, and it is non-competitive.

Dion Buffalo (1990) discusses the importance of storytelling from a Plains Cree healing perspective : "[h]ealing through stories is but one aspect of synthesizing our relationship with ourselves and with the entire universe" (p.120). She adds:

> The storyteller is a healer or synergizer within an Indian community whose function is to produce sound-words for the listeners so that constricted energy can be released. The synergizer uses picture words to awaken in the listeners the awareness that they have within themselves all the elements necessary for their own healing. Synergizers are also the seed bearers; they plant images in our consciousness that take root and flower. A seed-thought is the conscious impression that comes into being that liberates our mind and livens our imagination. Seed-thoughts have transformation energy because they surprise our consciousness into a new way of seeing. Storytelling is the vehicle used by synergizers to communicate seed-thoughts (p. 120).

Teaching and Sharing Circles

Teaching and sharing circles are powerful vehicles for healing and transmitting values. Charter (1994) states:

> These groups provide a rich environment for learning, altering values, and modelling behaviours. As such traditional teaching and sharing circles aid in the incorporation of a sense of individualism (in that the individual is an integral part of the community), community, and culture in an indirect, non-judgemental and non-interferring manner. Group members may choose to disclose or share information, or not, at levels or degrees of personal comfort which fosters honesty and trust and discourages competition (p. 6).

In these circles, the issues of expertise and authority are removed, and the quality of trust is nurtured. The group members learn from each other and rein-

force the belief that all knowledge is valued. An underlying principle which emerges from the Medicine Wheel is that each person travels around the circle of life at our own pace and with personal levels of understanding as a result of his or her experiences.

> We do not have the right to judge others because of their beliefs, values or behaviours since we have not had their experiences and are not learning their life lessons. If we are asked by others we may provide information we have gathered as a result of our own experiences; however, it should be as information not advice. If we have not had the experience, there is no shame in admitting that we do not know since we have not learned that lesson. Direct confrontation is not condoned since it is seen as interference and as judgmental (Charter 1994, p. 5).

Participation in Ceremonies

Most Aboriginal nations celebrate traditional ceremonies. However, not all Aboriginal people participate in or accept the validity of traditional ceremonies as a component of life or healing. In accordance with traditional values, respect is afforded to those who do not choose a traditional path to healing. Participation in traditional ceremonies is a personal choice which is not to be influenced by coercion in any form (Ballantyne, personal communication; Dustyhorn, personal communication; Hart, personal communication; Ryder, personal communication). It is considered to be a part of healing in contemporary Aboriginal societies, since it either confirms or reconnects indigenous peoples with their ancestral roots and belief systems (Hart, 1997; McCormick, 1994).

Traditional ceremonies may include attendance or participation in sundances, medicine lodges, fasts, sweats, sharing Circles, talking circles, pipe ceremonies, moon ceremonies, give-aways or potlatches. Participation is at the level and degree to which the participant is comfortable. However, in some ceremonies — in addition to developing a deeper spiritual understanding of oneself and how one is connected to the universe — individuals or community may be developing specific attributes such as courage, confrontation of personal fears, or meeting difficult personal goals. Participation in these ceremonies often requires major physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual sacrifices. These sacrifices are not only for the development of the individual; rather, they are made for the healing of the community.

These ceremonies, in addition to many others, help to confirm indigenous cultures in a variety of ways. Ceremonies are the means and the method for establishing social networks, connecting with the natural environment, reconnecting personally and anchoring oneself, helping others and being helped by them in return, developing a sense of spiritual connectedness, learning traditional teachings, and storytelling. Attendance and participation in traditional ceremonies provide opportunities to practice some of the most sacred values such as sharing, caring, and honesty, and to develop a sense of spiritual connectedness.

Ceremonies have been introduced into urban settings as a result of the following: (a) urbanization, (b) the natural evolution of traditional cultures in a contemporary context, and (c) social problems and issues which have resulted

from past and current social influences. The need for ceremonies for urban Aboriginal peoples is growing at a rapid rate as they relocate from home communities to urban centres in order to meet personal and professional goals.

Regnier (1995) discusses the need for and importance of reaffirming ceremonies in an educational context. Hart (1997) reviews 15 family violence projects "conceived, developed and implemented by Aboriginal people" (p.5), several of which were based in the largest urban centres in Canada. He notes that the core components of these projects were characterized by the valuing of tradition and culture, inclusion of elders, connectedness, restoration of balance, an attitude of caring, a preference for forgiveness rather than punishment, a sense of equality, nurturing and mutually respectful relationships, acceptance of client as a whole person, and a need for a holistic connection of the body, mind, and spirit.

Role Modelling

Traditional role models demonstrate story telling and give it life and purpose in sharing and teaching circles and in ceremonies. Role models provide the observer with a range of behaviours in a variety of situations and settings (McCormick, 1994; Regnier, 1995). Role modelling, at either an individual or group level, is a powerful means of teaching and of helping others incorporate traditional values through transmission of traditional knowledge. Appropriate behaviours are enacted by positive role models such as elders, healers, medicine people, traditional teachers, or healthy community members. Role models may also demonstrate inappropriate verbal expression, behaviours or display of emotions; however, traditional teachings take this into consideration. Respecting non-interference and a desire for harmony in the group, these situations serve as learning experiences for the observer. Such behaviours may be queried in an indirect manner, but they are not judged or criticised; rather, feedback is used to reinforce appropriate behaviours (Ballantyne, 1995, personal communication).

EMPOWERING COMMUNITY BASED APPROACHES

Aboriginal peoples have long argued that the solutions which have originated from within their own cultures have been "more effective than the disastrous 'solutions' imposed by the majority culture" (Couture, 1987, p. 184). Initiatives which originate in Aboriginal communitiesand which espouse those communities' worldviews, cultural imperatives, and traditional approaches have proven to be most successful in meeting their peoples' needs and in facilitating change.

A key aspect in de-colonization is *empowerment* — a process which facilitates access to personal, organizational, and community resources in order to have control of one's life (Hassenfeld, 1987). "It is a process ability that we all have, but which needs to be released . . . " (Rappaport, 1985, p. 17).

In the last decade, there has been an emergence of Aboriginal community-initiated programs and services which facilitate empowerment for individuals, families, and entire communities. The Nechi Institute and the Poundmaker

Treatment centre in Alberta, Nelson House Medicine Lodge in Manitoba, Joe Douquette Highschool in Saskatchewan, Community Holistic Circle Healing (CHCH) in Manitoba, and the Sacred Circle in Ontario are just a few examples of such initiatives.

SUPPORTING ABORIGINAL APPROACHES

One of the key aspects of an effective healing program is that "the empowerment process in an Aboriginal community cannot at this point in time happen in isolation or without the collaboration of government agencies and other non-Aboriginal service providers" (V. Seymour, personal communication, June, 1999). In order to facilitate community empowerment, all those who collaborate with Aboriginal communities in healing initiatives must understand and accept that Aboriginal peoples have practised viable healing methods based on their worldview throughout their history, and that these methods must be recognized and accepted as equal to Euroamerican therapeutic approaches (Absalon, 1993).

Counsellors, therapists, and other helpers who work with Aboriginal communities and/or Aboriginal clients must critically examine their role as *experts*. They must be prepared to relinquish control and learn, understand and accept realities and worldviews other than their own (Borg, Brownlee, & Delaney, 1995). The need for recognition and acceptance of Aboriginal healing models has been expressed by many Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal authors (Duran & Duran, 1995; Minor, 1992; Morrissette, McKenzie, & Morrissette, 1993; Regnier, 1995).

Other authors offer specific models and approaches to cross-cultural initiatives. Nadler (1983) points out that cross-cultural initiatives present a number of challenges: (a) many variables are unknown and will present themselves only as the process unfolds, (b) outcomes must be viewed in terms of working hypotheses and/or possible alternatives, and (c) the process must be descriptive and allow for change if and when necessary. He contrasts this *open model* with a *closed model* where (a) all variables are believed to be known at the start of the process, (b) all objectives are predetermined, and (c) the process is described in linear terms without provision for change. Although this has been the approach generally used in attempts to solve the socio-economic problems in Aboriginal communities in the past, it has not worked. Many authors have noted that the process of change needs to be initiated and implemented by the Aboriginal communities themselves, not by outside forces, interests, or influences (Couture, 1987; Dimock, 1981; Duran & Duran, 1995; Poonwassie, 1993; Regnier, 1995).

Dimock (1981) connects the notion of empowerment to social change. He describes a number of assumptions about working with changing social systems: (a) the community is the focus of change, (b) the people affected by the change should be involved in implementing that change, (c) those who have power in the system must support the change if it is to succeed, (d) resistance to change is normal and will assist in the stabilization of new changes, and (e) change is more likely to occur when opposition is reduced, rather than when support is strengthened.

Counselling and Therapy with Aboriginal Clients

Ideally, all communities would have adequate local resources to provide educational, counselling, and therapy services for all community members. That is not the reality for most other Aboriginal communities, and all Aboriginal clients do not have access to Aboriginal helpers. "Ethnic matching" is not always possible, and it does not eliminate all value conflicts (Merali, 1999, p. 30). Merali (1999) notes that counsellors and therapists must develop the understanding and the skills to work effectively with clients from a different culture.

Sue and Sue (1990) suggest that an effective and helpful counsellor will use a process which is consistent with the client's values, life experiences, and culturally conditioned communication, and will work with the client to define suitable goals. Techniques for facilitating empowerment include accepting the individual's definition of the problem, building upon his/her identified strengths, analysing with the individual his/her power in the situation, teaching needed skills, and collaboratively mobilizing resources and advocating for the individual (Gutierrez, 1990). Both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal helpers must also understand that many "Native American clients have been so acculturated that many times the focus of the therapy is merely to reconnect them to a traditional system of beliefs and make sense of their lifeworld from a traditional perspective" (Duran & Duran, 1995, p. 19). For some Aboriginal clients, decolonization may include the validation of traditional and cultural practices, if they wish to return to those value and belief systems. Others, however, may no longer value traditional approaches due to assimilation or personal choice (Charter et al., 1996; Morrissette et al., 1993). In order to begin to meet the needs of all Aboriginal clients, it is important to identify the critical components of the counselling process/method which help to facilitate de-colonization and empowerment.

Counsellors who work in cross-cultural settings must also consider the following: (a) be aware of the sociopolitical factors that affect the client, (b) understand that culture and language may present barriers in the counselling process, (c) acknowledge that feeling different may influence the client's openness to change, (d) emphasize the importance of world views and cultural identity in the counselling process, (e) understand cultural and communication style differences among various groups, and (f) become aware of one's own cultural biases and assumptions (Sue & Sue, 1990).

CONCLUSION

As cited in Duran and Duran (1995), Chief Sitting Bull wisely advised his people: Take what is good from the White Man and let's make a better life for our children" (p. 19). The new millennium brings with it many new opportunities to learn and to work with Aboriginal peoples and to take what is good from them. The concepts and the ideas presented here are intended to begin to address that process by building a foundation of awareness, knowledge, understanding, and

respect for Aboriginal worldviews and the empowering initiatives which originate from that context. We present these ideas in the spirit of sharing and respect as expressed in these words:

> Once you give an idea to council or a meeting, it no longer belongs to you. It belongs to the people. Respect demands that you listen intently to the ideas of others in council and that you do not insist that your idea prevail. Indeed, you should freely support the ideas of others if they are true and good, even if those ideas are quite different from the ones you have contributed. The clash of ideas brings forth a spark of truth (Bopp et al., 1988, p. 78).

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