

---

## A Narrative Study of Counsellors' Understandings of Inuit Spirituality

---

Christine Wihak

Noorfarah Merali

*University of Alberta*

---

### ABSTRACT

Eight non-Indigenous counsellors who temporarily lived in Nunavut to serve Inuit clients were interviewed regarding what they learned about Inuit spirituality during their cultural immersion experience. They were also asked about how they applied their understandings of the Inuit spiritual worldview in their professional practice. Counsellors' narratives of their experiences in Nunavut revealed an understanding of the unity of humans and the natural environment in Inuit spirituality, alternate versions of reality, and diverse religious beliefs and rituals. Counsellors' reflective practice facilitated a search for culturally meaningful explanations of clients' presenting problems, as well as the use of culturally appropriate healing methods.

### RÉSUMÉ

Huit conseillers non autochtones ayant temporairement vécu dans le Nunavut pour servir des clients inuits ont été interviewés à propos de ce qu'ils ont appris de la spiritualité inuite au cours de leur immersion. On leur a aussi demandé comment ils ont appliqué leurs compréhensions de la vision spirituelle du monde inuit dans leur pratique professionnelle. Les narrations qu'ont faites les conseillers de leurs expériences au Nunavut ont révélé une compréhension de l'unité des humains et du milieu naturel dans la spiritualité inuite, des versions différentes de la réalité et de diverses croyances et rituels religieux. La pratique réflexive des conseillers a facilité une recherche d'explications significatives au plan culturel chez les clients présentant des problèmes, de même que l'utilisation de méthodes de guérison adaptées à la culture.

The importance of spirituality in counselling Indigenous clients is increasingly being recognized (France, 1997; Garrett & Herring, 2001; Herring, 1992; LaFromboise, Trimble, & Mohatt, 1990; Pedersen, 1998, 2000; Sue & Sue, 2003). Commenting on the relevance of Indigenous spirituality for the counselling process, Lee and Armstrong (1995) state: "there is often little distinction made between spiritual existence and secular life. The philosophical tenets inherent in spiritual beliefs influence all aspects of human development and interaction" (p. 451). The idea that counselling approaches and processes derived from a secular, Eurocentric framework can be transferred to work with Indigenous people has been challenged based on fundamental incongruities between the European/North American and Indigenous ways of life (Nakamura, 1997; Yang, Hwang, Pedersen, & Daiboo, 2003). These incongruities include Indigenous peoples' emphasis on collectivism versus individualism, harmony with nature versus mastery over nature, and perceived connections between the material world

and the spirit world (Garrett & Herring; Sue & Sue; Yang et al.). A community's spiritual orientation will inevitably affect how presenting problems are understood, how the change process is thought to occur, and clients' ideas about what facilitates or hinders change (Garrett & Herring; Pedersen, 2000; Sue & Sue). In order to interact with Indigenous clients in a culturally sensitive manner, accurately assess their presenting problems, and intervene in culturally appropriate ways, counsellors need to develop an understanding of the clients' spiritual world (France; Garret & Herring; Sue & Sue). This study examined non-Indigenous counsellors' learnings about client spirituality through their contact with the Inuit community in Canada's north, along with how they applied these learnings in their professional practice.

#### THE INDIGENOUS SPIRITUAL WORLDVIEW AND ITS RELATION TO MENTAL HEALTH

A fundamental aspect of the Indigenous spiritual worldview that is shared among different subcultures is relationality (Garret & Herring, 2001; Herring, 1992; Sue & Sue, 2003). This involves a perceived connection between all animate and inanimate objects, including humans, animals, and the natural environment. Among the Inuit of Canada's north, anthropologists have observed that humans and animals form "a single cognitive community" (Wenzel, 1991, p. 140). Humans and animals regularly interact in culturally prescribed ways and are viewed as mutual sources of support. They are also assumed to live by a shared set of moral values (Wenzel). Anthropologists have labeled the Inuit culture "eco-centric," due to individuals' affective attunement to animals and to their physical surroundings (Wenzel). The land that Inuit live on is accorded special spiritual significance, as it unifies humans and the natural environment (France, 1997; Wenzel). The spiritually oriented environmental consciousness observed among the Inuit is fundamentally different from secular forms of environmental concern related to climate change (Oskamp & Schultz, 2005). Inuit individuals consciously work toward achieving harmony between themselves and the environment in their use of natural resources and in their explicit regard for their land (Sue & Sue).

The concept of relationality also includes a perceived connection between the past and present in the Indigenous worldview. Sue and Sue (2003) describe Indigenous cultures as characterized by a "Being" orientation. This orientation to life reflects a focus on the present, with a recognition that individuals and spiritual influences from the past may influence one's present life. Wihak and Merali (2003) described cases where Inuit clients perceived their ancestors to be influencing their current presenting problems. They discussed the importance of acknowledging and validating clients' explanations for their presenting problems and collaboratively identifying culturally appropriate problem-solving strategies. One of their suggestions for responding to perceived relations between the past and present among Inuit clients was to consult Elders within the community about how spiritual influences from the past could be addressed in counselling.

Indigenous spiritual beliefs may influence clients' explanations of their pre-

senting problems, as well as the types of healing strategies that are viewed as appropriate for resolving emotional difficulties (Garrett & Herring, 2001; Wihak & Merali, 2003). Waldram, Herring, and Young (1995) noted that "the world is seen as a place in which harmony and balance exist between and among human beings and spiritual or 'other than human' entities, and serious illness or issues are indicative of a disruption in this balance" (p. 101). The importance of interpersonal harmony is observed in a desire to preserve interpersonal relationships and to ensure all family and community members' needs are taken into account when planning one's course of action (Lafromboise et al., 1990). The value of harmony with the spiritual world raises the possibility of spiritually-based solutions to clients' presenting problems. Sue and Sue (2003) described the various healing traditions, such as sweat lodge ceremonies or potlatches, that exist within Indigenous communities to restore balance and harmony. They identified Elders and shamans as recognized healers.

Korhonen (2002) studied Inuit beliefs about mental health and healing in order to identify culturally appropriate counselling strategies. She noted that the counselling process could be a useful and culturally appropriate healing modality if: (a) clients' beliefs about the spiritual origins of their problems are validated; and (b) Inuits' traditional ideas about how to heal the mind, body, and spirit are incorporated in intervention planning.

Taking into account the direct links between spiritual worldviews and the way clients' presenting problems may be expressed, explained, and treated, Fukuyama and Sevig (1999) proposed that existing models of multicultural counselling competence need to be extended to include an understanding of client spirituality as a core competency. They also posited that an essential skill of competent multicultural counsellors should be the ability to incorporate clients' spirituality in the counselling process. They adopted the criteria for spirituality developed by the Association for Spiritual, Ethical, and Religious Values in Counselling (Summit Results, 1995, cited in Fukuyama & Sevig, 1999). These criteria include a value system or worldview that guides daily living, beliefs in connectedness and/or transcendence, and a search for meaning.

There is currently a lack of research accounts that describe non-Indigenous counsellors' experiences of learning about the spiritual dimension of Indigenous life. Lafromboise et al. (1990) provided summarized case studies about counsellors' incorporation of Indigenous spirituality in the intervention process. However, they did not provide any details about how the counsellors came to know about client spirituality or what they came to understand about it. This precluded the identification of parallels between their spiritual knowledge and development and the nature of their cross-cultural practice. In Smith and Morrisette's (2001) study of non-Indigenous counsellors working with Indigenous clients, counsellor participants discussed how encounters with their clients' spirituality prompted a desire to understand the world from their clients' perspectives. No information was provided about how the counsellors approached the learning process or about the specific learnings that occurred.

The purpose of this study is to better understand what counsellors learn about spirituality through contact with Indigenous clients and communities, and how they incorporate these learnings in their professional practice. The dual focus on learning and application addresses the gaps in previous research. It also allows for an exploration of the challenges involved in expanding the Eurocentric basis of counsellors' previous training to embrace Indigenous ways. The study focuses on counsellors who went to Nunavut to provide services to Inuit clients. The counsellors in the study are sojourners (people who temporarily live and work within another culture). The cross-cultural immersion experience may be a unique opportunity for counsellors to learn about spirituality as expressed in the daily life of a community.

In terms of population characteristics, 85% of the Nunavut population is Inuit, with the Indigenous language of Inuktitut as their native tongue. Social and mental health problems, such as domestic violence, substance abuse, depression, and suicide, are widespread (Korhonen, 2002). Working in Nunavut presents counsellors with the challenge of providing competent mental health services within the spiritually oriented cultural framework of the Inuit community—a framework that may significantly diverge from the secular nature of counsellors' professional training.

## METHOD

### *Participants*

*Study criteria and sampling issues.* There were four criteria for participation in this study: (a) counsellors lived in Nunavut for a minimum of two years, during which time they were involved in counselling Inuit clients; (b) they returned to southern Canada at least one year before the study took place; (c) they were born and raised in Canada and were of Western European or Canadian origin; and (d) they used English as their working language. The first criterion was established based on previous research that identified two years of cross-cultural immersion as a prerequisite for significant intercultural understanding (Bennett, 1986). In this research, the year subsequent to the immersion experience was perceived by sojourners to be a critical time for reflecting upon and processing the impact of their immersion experiences. Selecting counsellors based on their membership in the dominant cultural and linguistic group in Canada was expected to maximize exposure to cultural differences upon sojourning to Nunavut. While in Nunavut, counsellors are supported by English-speaking interpreters in their work with Inuit clients.

Participants were recruited through purposeful sampling (Patton, 1990). The first author had lived in Nunavut for 10 years to provide counselling services to Inuit clients. Other counsellors among her professional contacts who had also sojourned there were invited to participate in the research and to assist her in identifying possible additional participants. Only those counsellors who did not have an ongoing working relationship with the researcher were recruited.

*Counsellor introductions.* Eight counsellors participated in this study. All of them were female. The professional backgrounds and sojourns of each of the counsellor participants will be briefly described here. Pseudonyms chosen in collaboration with the participants are used in place of their real names. Demographic information such as participants' ages and the specific years during which they lived in Nunavut is excluded from the descriptions to prevent identification.

Bev, a pastoral counsellor, spent 19 years in Nunavut working as a school guidance counsellor and then as the director of a community counselling agency. She had worked with Inuit people living in Ottawa prior to her sojourn. At the time of the study, Bev had been back in southern Canada for one year.

Danya, a doctoral level psychologist, lived in Nunavut for two years to work as a counsellor at a community college. This was her first cross-cultural counselling experience. She had been back in southern Canada for seven years at the time of the study.

Debbie, a graduate level social worker (MSW) with previous experience working with Aboriginal bands in Alberta, spent seven years living in Nunavut while involved in counsellor training in a college social work program. She was also involved in direct mental health service provision to Inuit clients. At the time of the study, it had been six years since she had returned to southern Canada.

Deborah, a criminologist who had participated in numerous foreign aid programs, spent six years involved in counselling and counsellor education in a college setting in Nunavut. She had been back in southern Canada for nine years at the time of this study.

Fluff, a psychiatric social worker (MSW), lived in Nunavut for four years to work as a counsellor and mental health specialist. Her previous cross-cultural experience involved working with Aboriginal bands in several provinces. She returned to southern Canada 10 years before this study took place.

Michelle, a social worker (BSW) with no previous cross-cultural experience, also accepted a position as a mental health specialist in Nunavut, which she pursued for four years. She had also been back in Southern Canada for a decade prior to this study.

Rebecca, a social worker (BSW) with previous cross-cultural experience teaching English in South America, spent two years working as a counsellor in Nunavut. She returned to southern Canada two years prior to the time of this study.

Soshanna, a master's level psychologist who had completed interdisciplinary cross-cultural course work, worked as a mental health specialist in Nunavut for four years. She had been back in southern Canada for nine years when this study was conducted.

In relation to the focus of the study, five of the eight counsellors identified themselves as being religious or spiritual people. Two were Jewish (Danya and Soshanna), one was Roman Catholic (Michelle), one was Anglican (Bev), and one belonged to the B'hai faith (Debbie).

### *The Interview Process*

The counsellors participated in a two-hour individual interview about their sojourning experience at a place and time agreed upon by themselves and the principal researcher. The interviews began with an open-ended invitation to each participant to talk about the experience of living and working as a counsellor in Nunavut. Follow-up questions addressed participants' reasons for sojourning to Nunavut, how spirituality had affected their experiences in Nunavut, and what aspects of Inuit spirituality they encountered or learned about. They were also asked how they made use of any learnings about Inuit spirituality in their professional practice with Inuit clients.

The interviews were audiotaped and subsequently transcribed verbatim by the principal researcher. Interview transcripts were sent to each participant for review. During a scheduled follow-up interview to seek clarification or additional information about salient aspects of Inuit spirituality emerging from participants' transcripts, each participant was given the opportunity to add, delete, or change material in her transcript. With the participants' permission, review interviews were also audiotaped and transcribed, and relevant comments made were included in the data analysis process.

### *Qualitative Data Analysis*

From the transcripts, a chronological narrative of the sojourning experience was constructed for each participant, using the sequencing described in other studies of sojourners (Osland, 1995; Schild-Jones, 1999). Polkinghorne (1995) describes a narrative as a story with a beginning, middle, and end, where specific events or actions are described in their original context within an embedded plot. The sequencing of narratives for this study included counsellors' reasons for moving to Nunavut, the adjustments they were faced with upon arriving in Nunavut, the personal and professional learnings in relation to spirituality that resulted from cross-cultural contact, and their exit experiences. The audit trail (Merriam, 2002) from the raw transcript to the stories is easily traceable. The narratives were sent to the participants by mail for review and/or modification, and were discussed in a follow-up phone call. Participants confirmed that the narratives accurately reflected their sojourning experiences. They requested only minor changes to their stories to protect the confidentiality of Inuit clients they were speaking about.

Polkinghorne's (1995) method of analysis of narratives was used to conduct a cross-participant comparison of the chronological narratives to identify shared insights about Inuit spirituality, the process of translating knowledge into practice, and common changes in counsellors' approaches and intervention strategies stemming from cross-cultural contact. Analysis of narratives identified five major themes: (a) connections between humans, the natural environment, and the spirit world; (b) diversity in religious practice; (c) reflective counselling practice; (d) culturally sensitive assessment; and (e) culturally sensitive intervention.

Each of these themes will be described in the next section, along with excerpts from participants' narratives that exemplify the themes.

#### EMERGING THEMES

##### *Connections Between Humans, the Natural Environment, and the Spirit World*

The counsellors explained how their experience of living in Nunavut helped them to develop an appreciation of the unity between human beings and the natural environment in the Inuit worldview. They discussed how living in the Arctic helped them to directly experience the connection to the land that is felt by Inuit. Debbie remarked that the spiritual deepening she felt in Nunavut "was part of the experience of living in all that vastness." Deborah explained:

You get a sense of just how small you are when you stand at the top of the world and you can see nothing but horizon all around you ... That had a profound spiritual impact that emphasized to me ... our place in the world, and ... the importance of treading gently on the earth and dealing gently with people.

The counsellors shared that, through their sojourns, they also came to learn about how the land had special significance in uniting Inuit people with spiritual sources of help, such as ancestors, in times of difficulty. Fluff discussed her learnings about the coexistence of the past and present in Inuit life as taught to her by Elders in the community: "Especially when they were out on the land, but also sometimes when they were overburdened with worries and fears, the people from the past would come and help them. They could *see* them."

In her interview responses, Danya expanded on the idea of spiritual aid from non-traditional sources by describing clients' perceptions that when out on the land, animals could also offer them emotional assistance. She described a situation where a group of caribou surrounded one of her highly distressed clients while they were having a counselling session out on the tundra. She spoke about the insight she gained into the Inuit worldview when the client assured her that they "just came really to support her." Danya described the experience as a "changing-of-boundary experience," as it blurred the distinctions between the human community and the animal community. Within the human community, Fluff noted that there was a tight relational connection between people that led to "a willingness of people to become involved" in helping one another. She elaborated that "the learning began right there ... the constant learning of how to assist people to assist."

In reaction to their learnings about Inuit spirituality, the counsellor participants seemed to recognize that "life was very spiritually interpreted" (Rebecca). They also acknowledged that culturally acceptable meanings of life experiences or sensory experiences (e.g., visions of ancestors) tended to substantiate "alternate versions of reality" among the Inuit (Deborah). Summarizing their stance on Inuit spirituality, Deborah stated that spiritual factors are "always terribly relevant to people's interpretations of their problems or people's interpretations

of the world around them ... I have to be open to the possibility that a whole lot of people see that as reality.”

### *Diversity in Spiritual Practices*

The participants shared their learnings about the diverse religious/spiritual beliefs and practices observed among the Inuit community and Inuit clients. The counsellors made a distinction between Inuit involvement in organized Christianity brought by missionaries from southern Canada and traditional shamanistic practices. They reported that, according to their understandings, contemporary Inuit spirituality often reflects a blend of the two.

For Bev, an Inuktitut speaker and a long-term sojourner, taking part in the life of a local church was a “really big platform in being able to connect with people and work with them.” From this involvement, she was able to provide considerable detail on religious practices and how these affected counselling. She stressed, “It’s really essential to know that ... there are just as many varieties of religious preference and style in the North as there are in the South.” Debbie found that one of the key influences in Nunavut was Christianity. In talking with Inuit Elders about their approaches to life, she was surprised to learn that their statement, “We’ll do it the traditional way,” meant the way life is lived according to the Bible.

Bev acknowledged the prevalence of Indigenous shamanistic beliefs and healing ceremonies among the Inuit, commenting that “I think this is an aspect (of Inuit life) that cannot be ignored in mental health.” She explained that traditional beliefs and ceremonies may help reduce emotional suffering, stating that Inuit perceive them to “take the blackness out of the old style of living, ... they take the darkness out.” Reflecting on the religious diversity in Nunavut and the fact that it allowed people to find ways of creating meaning in their lives in a way that fit for them, Danya commented, “There was some help ... for them.... What was not great in some ways can help people in other ways.”

### *Reflective Counselling Practice*

The counsellors acknowledged that the process of transforming their developing knowledge of Inuit culture into counselling practice was an extremely challenging one. The transition to working within the Inuit worldview involved learning from mistakes and actively questioning one’s previous knowledge and assumptions. Debbie commented that working with the Inuit required building “a new framework” for counselling that departed significantly from her previous training from an individualistic perspective. Deborah achieved a similar realization after an incident in which she had utilized an individualistic approach in working with a group of Inuit women experiencing spousal abuse. She focused on the occurrence of the abuse, trying to encourage the women to exit abusive situations. In response, “as a body, these six women picked up their chairs and turned to face the nurse and exclude me completely from the discussion. The women didn’t speak to me for a few days.” Recognizing her oversight in neglect-

ing the needs of the abusive spouses from a relational perspective, as well as the possibility of spiritual resources in dealing with the abuse, Deborah stated, "I had never made such obvious mistakes." Sharing similar humbling experiences in counselling, Rebecca noted, "I thought that I had a lot more knowledge than I did, because you get a little bit smug."

In order to evaluate whether their appraisals of Inuit clients' presenting problems and intervention strategies were culturally appropriate, the counsellors appeared to move toward reflective practice. Michelle described conversations she had with her supervisor and colleagues about her clients, asking herself: "What are the assumptions we're making?" Similarly, Danya shared that two questions were at the forefront of her internal dialogue when working with Inuit clients: "How do you make changes in another culture? How do we know what's best for a different group of people?" Soshanna expressed that arriving at the answers to these questions requires "a willingness to just put aside your need to be right, in order to attend to other people's point of view." Also emphasizing the need to attend to clients' cultural perspectives, Debbie said that the key is "not to talk, but to listen and learn." Through ongoing reflection, seeking clients' "insider" perspectives on their presenting problems, and consultation with Inuit community members and colleagues, the counsellors learned how to incorporate Inuit spirituality in the assessment and intervention process.

#### *Culturally Sensitive Assessment*

Counsellor participants expressed that they utilized their developing knowledge of Inuit spirituality in forming impressions about the normativity of clients' cognitions, emotional states, and behaviours. Fluff discussed her awareness of how Inuit beliefs about the connection between the past and present could be interpreted as mental illness by people unfamiliar with cultural norms. She highlighted the example of the Inuit practice of giving a child the same name as someone who is deceased and raising the child with the assumption that he/she is a reincarnation of the deceased individual:

If somebody here ... were to tell you—as one of my clients did not too long ago—that she was the reincarnation of Cleopatra, probably a psychiatrist would diagnose her as having some delusion. But when you're in among people who are very spiritual ... you just really accept the reality of people's experiences.

Michelle elaborated on the significance of this Inuit practice, explaining how "everyone's relationship to the person that died was often very relevant to how that child was raised." Her acceptance of the normalcy of the practice was evident in her statement that "knowing this is relevant in helping this person" in a culturally sensitive way.

Fluff also discussed a case where a female client attributed her physical illness to spiritual influences. "She always knew that she would be [ill], and it was a curse for her.... her desire was to find a way to live with the curse." Fluff acknowledged the client's explanation of her illness rather than considering it evi-

dence of psychopathology. She conveyed that the client “couldn’t undo it or change it, but she could live a good life and maybe that would make it OK.” Taking into account spiritual beliefs in her assessment of this case, Fluff directed her work with the client toward management of the impact of the illness.

### *Culturally Sensitive Intervention*

Counsellor participants expressed that they made use of their understandings of Inuit spirituality in intervention planning. The counselling strategies they implemented with Inuit clients respected perceived connections between humans, animals, the natural environment, and the spirit world in the Inuit worldview. The examples they provided of counselling strategies they used to respond to clients’ presenting problems reflected a willingness to be creative and to seek the help of spiritual authorities when needed. Danya and Deborah’s accounts of their work with Inuit clients represent exemplars of this theme.

Providing more detail about the context of the “changing-of-boundary experience” previously described, Danya talked about her work with a client who expressed a great deal of anger about past abuse. Recognizing the connection between humans and nature, she explained, “I thought of an idea to go out on the land and to scream.” She accompanied the client out onto the tundra. Once they were far away from everybody, the client released her anger by screaming repeatedly. As they talked about some of the things that bothered her, a group of caribou suddenly came and surrounded them. According to Danya’s report of the impact of this intervention, the client felt that “they just came really to support her, and ... they didn’t come too close, really close enough, not touching us. It was a really special experience.”

Deborah was able to apply her acceptance of alternate realities among the Inuit in a practical way in a small, isolated Nunavut community. Although there was a severe housing shortage in this community, nobody would live in one particular house because a man had committed suicide there. Deborah expressed that homeless clients in need of shelter “believed the house was haunted.” Deborah approached the Anglican minister and said, “This is a spiritual issue.... There’s got to be something that you can do as a religious man to fix that house and make it liveable.” As a result, “he blessed the house ... he did something to put this spirit to rest, and it worked.” Clients seeking shelter were then willing to move into the home to meet their basic living needs.

## DISCUSSION

Counsellors’ narratives suggested that the experience of living in Nunavut and working with Inuit clients expanded their conceptions of Inuit spiritual life. The counsellors expressed their understanding of various aspects of Inuit spirituality, including (a) the perceived unity of humans, animals, the natural environment, and the spirit world (France, 1997; Garrett & Herring, 2001; Herring, 1992; Wenzel, 1991); (b) alternate realities or culturally accepted meanings attached

to specific sensory experiences (Herring; Korhonen, 2002; Wihak & Merali, 2003); and (c) diverse religious beliefs and spiritual traditions/healing methods (Garrett & Herring; Korhonen; Sue & Sue, 2003; Wihak & Merali).

### *Multicultural Counselling Competence*

Counsellors articulated the challenges involved in translating their developing knowledge of Inuit spirituality into counselling practice. The mistakes they made in the counselling process had the effect of rupturing the therapeutic alliance and/or invalidating their previous learning about how to conduct counselling from an individualistic perspective. These disjunctures prompted them to move toward reflective practice. The counsellors identified a variety of strategies to assess the cultural appropriateness of their problem conceptualizations and interventions: (a) questioning their assumptions about clients and about the change process in another culture, (b) learning about culture from each individual client, and (c) consultation with community members and colleagues with more extensive cross-cultural experience. All of these strategies are encouraged when working cross-culturally (Pedersen, 2000; Sue & Sue, 2003). Counsellors' continual self-monitoring and openness to learning seemed to facilitate many insights about working effectively with Inuit clients.

Counsellors' comments about the variability in spiritual beliefs and practices among the Inuit showed recognition of within-group diversity. They acknowledged the wide range of spiritual influences in Nunavut, from Christianity to Shamanism. This recognition would assist counsellors in adopting the person-in-culture perspective described by Pedersen (1998, 2000). Taking a person-in-culture perspective involves approaching each client as an individual who may or may not adhere to the beliefs or practices of his/her culture or subculture. Sue (1998) identified the skill of "knowing when to generalize and be inclusive and when to individualize and be exclusive" (p. 446) as a critical aspect of counsellor cultural competence.

An understanding of each individual's spiritual beliefs and their congruence or lack of congruence with the Inuit worldview would also assist counsellors in forming accurate judgements of clients' cognitive and emotional states. The counsellors described clients who could have been misdiagnosed as experiencing delusions, hallucinations, or other forms of psychopathology if they were not knowledgeable about the culturally acceptable meanings the clients attached to their experiences. Ridley, Li, and Hill (1998) noted that Type 1 errors, which involve mistakenly identifying normal cultural or spiritual experiences as pathological, are the most common errors made in the cross-cultural assessment process. They argued that Type 1 errors have very serious consequences for counselling. These include loss of counsellor credibility, rupture of the therapeutic alliance, and premature termination. Ridley et al. also noted that when counsellors are in the beginning stages of learning about another culture and have only acquired a superficial knowledge about cultural experiences, they may be at risk for making Type 2 errors. Type 2 errors involve failing to identify cogni-

tions, emotional states, or behaviours that warrant clinical attention due to the assumption that they are culturally normative. These errors may result in counsellors neglecting clients' psychological needs. Awareness of specific alternate versions of reality in another culture is therefore considered to be a prerequisite for culturally competent practice (Arredondo et al., 1996; Sue & Sue, 2003).

In addition to facilitating accurate case conceptualization, counsellors' understandings of Inuit spiritual life appeared to stimulate the use of culturally appropriate intervention strategies. Through learning from their mistakes, ongoing reflection, and consultation with colleagues, the counsellors were eventually able to make use of perceived connections between people, spirits, and the land to plan interventions. Their intervention strategies were responsive to the importance of relationality in the Inuit worldview. When working from a Eurocentric counselling perspective, individualism is emphasized in both case conceptualization and intervention; the client's role in the development of the problem is explored and the client is encouraged to take personal responsibility for problem resolution. This reflects the assumption that clients have an internal locus of control and internal locus of responsibility (Sue & Sue, 2003). In contrast, embracing a relational worldview requires acknowledging the possibility of there being external influences on the problem and/or its resolution, such as other members of the community, natural world, or divine beings (Sue & Sue).

The shift to operating from an external locus of control and external locus of responsibility necessitates addressing all people affected by a problem and incorporating all perceived resources in assisting a client (Sue & Sue, 2003). Counsellors' accounts of consulting with shamans or spiritual authorities to inquire about spiritually-based healing strategies for Inuit clients showed respect for the relational aspect of Inuit life. The skill of generating counselling strategies that are compatible with the spiritual beliefs and worldview of a particular group is another key element of multicultural counselling competence (Sue, Arredondo, & McDaavis, 1992; Sue & Sue).

Fukuyama and Sevig (1997, 1999) suggested that spiritual understanding enhances a counsellor's multicultural competence, and conversely, that multicultural experience supports spiritual understanding. The accounts of the non-Indigenous counsellors who participated in this study provide partial support for the notion that being aware of Inuit clients' spirituality facilitates culturally sensitive practice; they suggest that awareness is only likely to be followed by appropriate practice if counsellors actively examine the implications of Indigenous spirituality for the diagnosis and change process.

### *Implications for Counselling*

The centrality of spirituality in the Indigenous worldview suggests that clients' explanations of their presenting problems and preferred problem-solving strategies may be spiritually based (Garrett & Herring, 2001; Herring, 1992; Korhonen, 2002; Sue & Sue, 2003; Wihak & Merali, 2003). Participation in Indigenous communities may provide a basis for learning about spirituality while

building relationships with community members. Paniagua (1994) reported that Indigenous clients value counsellor involvement in their cultural communities even more than counsellors' in-session behaviour. Community involvement provides the basic understanding of a group's way of life required for cross-cultural empathy (Paniagua). However, the findings of this study suggest that reflective practice is a prerequisite for effectively translating newly acquired knowledge of spirituality into culturally sensitive counselling. The various strategies identified for facilitating this translation may be very useful to counsellors attempting to learn how to work effectively in a new cultural environment. These strategies focus on questioning assumptions made about clients and about the process of change among members of a different culture, consulting with community members and colleagues, and inviting clients to teach the counsellor about their culture.

Learning about culture from each client would assist counsellors to adopt the person-in-culture perspective to assess whether each individual manifests communal spiritual beliefs (Pedersen, 1998, 2000). Assessing the congruence between client beliefs or explanations of experiences and those of the community may minimize Type 1 and Type 2 errors (Ridley et al., 1998). Building connections with community members could also facilitate referrals to Indigenous healers when appropriate (France, 1997). Through the use of the strategies described, counsellors working in Indigenous communities may be better positioned to establish and maintain a solid working alliance with clients and to offer culturally sensitive help.

### *Study Evaluation*

The results of this study are limited by the small sample size and the long interval between some counsellors' practice in Nunavut and the timing of research interviews. The time lag may have allowed counsellors to reflect upon or expand upon their cross-cultural learning. Despite these limitations, the study revealed important information about the counsellors' attempts to understand and utilize client spirituality in counselling.

The study met three key criteria for quality control in qualitative research (Stiles, 1993): (a) it identified aspects of Inuit spirituality that the sojourning counsellors collectively became cognizant of and their shared ways of addressing them in counselling (uncovering), (b) the co-construction of narratives and themes by the researcher and the participants established interpersonal agreement in the data analysis process (consensual validity), and (c) the emerging themes resonated with participants' own accounts of their cross-cultural learning (testimonial validity). Future research should examine sojourning counsellors' preconceptions about Indigenous spirituality and the processes through which they are confirmed or disconfirmed during their immersion experiences.

### References

- Arredondo, P., Toporek, R., Brown, S. B., Jones, J., Locke, D. C., Sanchez, J., et al. (1996). Operationalization of the multicultural counseling competencies. *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development, 24*, 42–78.
- Bennett, M. J. (1986). Towards ethnorelativism: A developmental model of intercultural sensitivity. In R. M. Paige (Ed.), *Cross-cultural orientation: New conceptualizations and applications* (pp. 27–70). Lanham, MD: University Press of America.
- France, M. H. (1997). First Nations: Helping and learning in the Aboriginal community. *Guidance & Counselling, 12*, 3–8.
- Fukuyama, M. A., & Sevig, T. D. (1997). Spiritual issues in counselling: A new course. *Counselor Education & Supervision, 36*, 233–245.
- Fukuyama, M. A., & Sevig, T. D. (1999). *Integrating spirituality into multicultural counseling*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Garrett, J. T., & Herring, R. (2001). Honoring the power of relation: Counselling native adults. *Journal for Humanistic Counseling, Education and Development, 40*, 139–161.
- Herring, R. D. (1992). Seeking a new paradigm: Counseling Native Americans. *Journal of Multicultural Counseling & Development, 20*, 35–43.
- Korhonen, M. (2002). *Inuit clients and the effective helper: An investigation of culturally sensitive counselling*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation. Durham University, Durham, England.
- Lafromboise, T., Trimble, J. E., & Mohatt, G. V. (1990). Counseling interventions and American Indian tradition: An integrative approach. *Counseling Psychologist, 18*, 628–654.
- Lee, C. C., & Armstrong, K. L. (1995). Indigenous models of mental health intervention: Lessons from traditional healers. In J. G. Ponterotto, J. M. Casas, L. A. Suzuki, & C. M. Alexander (Eds.), *Handbook of multicultural counseling* (pp. 441–456). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Merriam, S. B. (2002). Assessing and evaluating qualitative research. In S. B. Merriam (Ed.), *Qualitative research in practice: Examples for discussion and analysis* (pp. 18–39). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Nakamura, H. (1997). *Ways of thinking of Eastern peoples*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Oskamp, S., & Schultz, P. W. (2005). *Attitudes and opinions* (3rd ed.). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum & Associates.
- Osland, J. S. (1995). *The adventure of working abroad: Hero tales from the global frontier*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Paniagua, F. (1994). *Assessing and treating culturally diverse clients*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Patton, M. Q. (1990). *Qualitative evaluation and research methods* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Pedersen, P. B. (1998). *Culture-centered counseling interventions: Striving for accuracy*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Pedersen, P. B. (2000). *Handbook for developing multicultural awareness* (3rd ed.). Alexandria, VA: American Counselling Association.
- Polkinghorne, D. (1995). Narrative configuration in qualitative analysis. In J. A. Hatch & R. Wisniewski (Eds.), *Life history and narrative* (pp. 5–23). Washington, DC: Falmer Press.
- Ridley, C. R., Li, L. C., & Hill, C. L. (1998). Multicultural assessment: Reexamination, reconceptualization, and practical application. *Counseling Psychologist, 26*, 827–910.
- Schild-Jones, L. (1999). *The transcultural process: Creative expression in a chaotic world*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation. Fielding Institute, Santa Barbara, CA.
- Smith, D. B., & Morrisette, P. J. (2001). The experiences of White male counsellors who work with First Nations clients. *Canadian Journal of Counselling, 35*, 74–88.
- Stiles, W. B. (1993). Quality control in qualitative research. *Clinical Psychology Review, 13*, 593–613.
- Sue, S. (1998). In search of cultural competence in psychotherapy and counseling. *American Psychologist, 53*, 440–448.

- Sue, D. W., Arredondo, P., & McDavis, R. J. (1992). Multicultural counseling competencies and standards: A call to the profession. *Journal of Counseling & Development, 70*, 477–486.
- Sue, D. W., & Sue, D. (2003). *Counseling the culturally diverse: Theory and practice* (4th ed.). New York: Wiley.
- Waldram, J. B., Herring, D. A., & Young, T. K. (1995). *Aboriginal health in Canada: Historical, cultural, and epidemiological perspectives*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Wenzel, G. (1991). *Animal rights, human rights: Ecology, economy and ideology in the Canadian Arctic*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Wihak, C., & Merali, N. (2003). Culturally sensitive counselling in Nunavut: Implications of Inuit traditional knowledge. *Canadian Journal of Counselling, 37*, 243–255.
- Yang, K. S., Hwang, K. K., Pedersen, P. B., & Daiboo, I. (2003). *Progress in Indigenous Asian social psychology: Conceptual and empirical contributions*. Westport, CT: Praeger.

### *About the Authors*

Dr. Christine Wihak completed her doctoral research focusing on the development of multicultural counselling competence in the Department of Educational Psychology at the University of Alberta. She has spent over 10 years in Nunavut working in a variety of roles, including education of counsellors, program development, and policy implementation.

Dr. Noorfarah Merali is an associate professor in the CPA-accredited Graduate Program in Counselling Psychology at the University of Alberta. She is a specialist in cross-cultural counselling who is actively involved in the training of mental health service providers in community and health settings in order to stimulate culturally sensitive practice.

Address correspondence to Dr. Noorfarah Merali, Department of Educational Psychology, 6-102 Education Centre North, University of Alberta, Edmonton, AB, Canada T6G 2G5, e-mail <noorfarah.merali@ualberta.ca>.