

## THEORY AND PRACTICE

### Understanding Native American healing practices

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Counselor cultural competency with respect to Native Americans requires understanding of common healing practices and ceremonies and of their spiritual significance. Historical trauma serves as a general backdrop for Native America experience and identity. Particular tribal practices and the individual's degree of affiliation with such practices provide a more specific context for client worldview. Knowledge of the symbolic significance of common ceremonies and healing practices will support counseling efforts to be relevant and effective with respect to Native American clients. Direct interaction and involvement with Native American communities facilitate a deeper understanding of Native American cultural identity and healing practices.

**Keywords:** Native American identity; healing; medicine; spirituality; cultural competency

#### Introduction

In order to work effectively with diverse populations, counselors must find ways to develop cultural intelligence, that is, for counselors to develop the ability to adapt effectively to a different culture (Earley & Ang, 2003). With cultural intelligence counselors adapt to the culture of clients as compared to expecting clients to adapt to the counselor's culture. Earley and Ang (2003) suggest that cultural intelligence includes cognitive, motivational, and behavioral dimensions, similar to the elements of knowledge, awareness, and skills described in multicultural counseling literature (McAuliffe, 2008). These elements including knowledge of the worldview of clients, awareness of one's own worldviews, and incorporating knowledge skillfully in conducting counseling activities. Such elements can be examined through the lens of indigenous psychology that seeks to understand the worldviews of diverse peoples from their own perspectives, including knowledge, awareness, and skills (Kim & Park, 2006).

In their 10-year review of counseling and counseling psychology research articles, Delgado-Romero, Galvin, Maschino, and Rowland (2005) found an underrepresentation of articles about Native Americans. This article is intended to fill in some of the gaps in the literature regarding Native Americans. This article describes Native American healing practices from the perspective of indigenous psychology in order that counselors will understand the importance and meaning of traditional practices

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in terms of healing and holistic balance. The authors of this article engaged in a research project supported by the Bradley University Graduate School to document Native American healing practices from the perspective of participants of traditional ceremonies and other events organized through Seven Circles Heritage Foundation, Edwards, IL. This research was approved by the Bradley University Committee on the Use of Human Subjects in Research. Seven Circles is an organization established to help maintain and share indigenous cultural practices and is not limited to a particular tribal outlook (<http://7circlesheritage.org>). The first author is also a member of the Board of Directors for Seven Circles. In addition to interviews, the authors consulted relevant literature.

Native American healing practices exemplify key cultural perspectives and influence the identity development of Native American individuals. Such healing practices are based upon traditions and perspectives typically outside the mainstream of western psychological tenets, yet can have a significant impact on the sense of wellbeing for Native Americans. According to Hammerschlag (1992), Native Americans' celebration of ritual serves to invest symbolic meaning to the experiences of one's life. It is incumbent upon counselors to learn of such differing perspectives in order to better understand Native American views, build a background from which to appropriately work with Native American persons, and in general develop multicultural flexibility in their counseling practices. Beyond this perspective is the importance of those raised in western tradition to build relationships with indigenous practitioners in order to contribute to an enlarged view of all through meaningful listening and exchange (Mehl-Madrona, 2007).

To build cultural empathy and to have a foundational understanding to support needs related to social justice, it is important to know the historical context that Native Americans as tribal peoples have suffered greatly (Herring, 1992). Throughout the colonization of the Americas and continuing into the present day, Native Americans have experienced genocide, theft of resources, systematic oppression of cultural and spiritual practices, and been denied opportunities to pursue their inherent rights to follow their vision of the American dream. This overwhelming historical trauma has posed a continuing disruptive challenge to the wellbeing of many Native Americans (Garrett, 2008; Weaver, 2002). In addition, Native Americans were seen as less than fully human and deemed to have been incapable of grieving by the dominant society. This societal attitude along with a prohibition of public grieving rituals served as a disenfranchising Native Americans of their grief and contributed to furthering instead a sense of shame and robbing Native Americans of a sense of identity and cultural solidarity in dealing with their grief (Brave Heart & DeBruyn, 1998).

This article will describe some of the basic values and views of many Native Americans as currently practiced. Even so, it cannot possibly represent or do full justice to the more than 700 different tribes with a great variety of values and practices (Cohen, 2003).

### **Defining medicine/health/wholeness**

Healing and even the term "medicine" from a Native American perspective are suggestive of a view of life that differs radically from the western medical model. While the western medical view typically equates healing with curing, from a Native

American perspective, healing is more akin to “recovering one’s wholeness” (Cohen, 2003) or to reestablish harmony with nature (Rybak, Lakota Eastin, & Robbins, 2004; Thomason, 1991). Wellness from a Native American perspective considers the communal context for individuals as well as they seek a balance of mental, spiritual, and physical aspects of living (Weaver, 2002). The inclusion of the non-material as essential in the healing process distinguishes Native American medicine from western medicine (Peat, 1994). Mehl-Madronna (2007) identified the value in recovering a focus on the quality of life in the healing process through intentional, compassionate, and relationship-oriented approach strongly exemplified by indigenous healing traditions. This view focuses in on the type of energies that exist in the relationships between people, their spiritual connections, and their connections with the earth. A common Native American sense of spirituality includes a sense that each and every part of the cosmos is imbued with spirit, not only people but everything including animals, plants, rocks, rivers, and so on (Matheson, 1996). Having a sense of connection to the spiritual elements in all that exists is an important dimension of *The Red Path*.

### ***The Red Path***

The Red Path or the Red Road can be another way to describe the path to wholeness and harmony with nature. The Red Path is characterized by traditional Native American cultural values such as establishing a feeling of belonging, a sense of mastery, respect for independence, and promotion of generosity and unselfishness (Thin Elk, 1993). Healers follow the Red Path as healing practices and ceremonies taught to them by wise and experienced mentors (Lewis, 1990). The Red Road is the path of good, described in the Medicine Wheel as the line from North to South. The Black Road is the path of warfare and destruction and makes up the path from West to East in the Medicine Wheel. Black Elk taught that humans walk both roads (McGaa, 1995). At the Seven Circles Heritage Center, a mural of the Red Path was painted by artist Charlie Armstrong consisting of a series of paintings depicting creation from a Native American perspective, life in harmony with the earth, the disruptions and genocide that coincided with the arrival of Europeans, followed by a revival and return to traditional Native American ways that offer a renewed sense of hope and spiritual connection. The Medicine Wheel concept expresses ideas associated with the Red Path.

### ***Medicine Wheel***

The basis of the Medicine Wheel is a circle. In Black Elk’s words, “Behold the circle of a nation’s hoop, for it is holy, being endless” (Neihardt, 1932, p. 2). The Medicine Wheel serves to orient one according to the cardinal directions as well as within the many aspects of life associated with the different directions. The circle encloses a cross that forms the four spokes of the wheel, with each spoke pointing to a different direction. There may be variations by tribe with respect to the particular associations made with each direction. In one common medicine wheel type, the East has to do with the rising sun and is associated with spirituality and the color red. The South is connected with full daylight, nature, and the color yellow. The West is the direction of the setting sun and has to do with the physical aspects of life and the color black. The North is the direction from which the cold winter winds

blow and bring snow. It is associated with cognitive aspects of life and the color white. The Medicine Wheel serves as a reminder that all aspects of life are important and need to be balanced. If important aspects of life are ignored, life will be unbalanced and more difficult. (Coggins, 1990; Garrett, 1998; Rybak, Lakota Eastin, & Robbins, 2004).

### *Native American healing practices*

There are a number of common Native American healing practices that tend to be practiced by many tribes and those who subscribe to a pan-Indian outlook. These practices include powwow, music, smudging, storytelling, sweat lodge, pipe ceremony, and use of herbs. Some practices such as sweat lodge will often incorporate music, smudging, pipe ceremony, herbs, and sometimes storytelling.

#### *Powwow*

A powwow is a combination of the social and sacred coming together of Indian peoples. Powwows include a circular arena in which Native American drumming, singing, and dancing take place. Many attendees wear traditional Native American regalia, usually designed and fashioned themselves. Wearing regalia and dancing in the arena circle is often an expression of solidarity with identities as Native Americans, giving meaning and expression to such terms as *mitakuye oyasin* – “we are all related” in the Lakota language (McGaa, 1995). Those in attendance at a powwow can have experiences very individual to themselves (Garrett & Wilbur, 1999). In addition to the drumming and dancing, trade booths are typically set up to sell traditional and modern Native American goods, crafts, musical instruments, artwork, and foods.

#### *Music: Dance, drum, flute*

The drum holds a special and sacred significance for many Native Americans as its round form represents the entire world, and the rhythmic beat represents the heartbeat of the world (Brown, 1953). Drumming and dance are common aspects of powwows and other gatherings of Native Americans. Drumming and singing are integral parts of most healing ceremonies (Lyon, 1996). Research suggests that drumming can stimulate a variety of physiological responses that have mystical implications within particular spiritual traditions (Neher, 1962). Traditional sacred songs serve for specific ceremonial occasions, but new songs may be created to serve new and different circumstances (Bad Hand, 2002). Music and dance serve as a connection among the past, present, and future (Bad Hand, 2002). One subject interviewed for this project described dancing at powwows as one in which he is joined by his ancestors, thus directly experiencing a timeless connection to those who have gone before us.

The Sundance in particular is one of the key rites for Oglala Sioux (Deloria, 1929). It involves a great undertaking by the willing to sacrifice themselves and their suffering in behalf of the people so that their understanding and resolve to persevere will increase. This rite represents the giving of one's comfort for the sake of the greater community good. Sundancers have leather thongs attached to their flesh at the chest, back, and/or shoulders, with the other end attached to buffalo skulls.

They dance until the flesh is torn free, representing liberation from the earthly bonds of ignorance (Brown, 1953). Other sacred dances include Gourd Dances and Spirit Dances (Szlemo, Wood, & Thurman, 2006). Participation in these dances has been associated with reduction in use and abuse of substances including alcohol (Abbot, 1998 as cited in Szlemo et al., 2006; Jilek, 1982).

A Native American flute player interviewed for this project described his experience as one of gaining stress relief and that others who hear him play a Native American flute communicate to him that they experience peaceful feelings while listening.

### *Smudging*

Smudging is a means of purification, often through passing the smoke of burning cedar, sage, or sweetgrass over individuals, including healers and those seeking healing, and throughout spaces. Cedar and sage serve to dispel negative energies of various kinds, while sweetgrass attracts positive energies (Cohen, 2003). In these ways, smudging can facilitate the healing process as beneficial energy is drawn in and harmful negative energies are drawn away. Smudging is frequently a part of other sacred ceremonies such as *inipi* to prepare a person and space for further spiritual experience.

### *Story-telling*

Traditionally, Native American tribes depended on the oral tradition of storytelling as a primary means of conveying information from one generation to the next (Beck, Walters, & Francisco, 1977). Storytelling kept alive ideas of tribal and human origins, histories, ceremonies, and ways of seeking healing. Thus, storytelling contributes to one's sense of identity, understanding of context, and path toward healing, as well as influencing one's perception of reality (Bigfoot & Dunlap, 2006). Indigenous stories of healing are as valid as any of modern western medical science and offer means to understand the uniqueness of the experience of the healing process for the individual (Mehl-Madronna, 2007). Such stories can offer faith and hope in the healing process to those suffering and the stories themselves serve as medicine and contribute to healing. Mehl-Madronna (2007, p. 13) observed that "a narrative approach allows us to accept the validity of people's stories... The underlying principle is the connectedness of all things, but this manifests in different ways in different families and cultures."

### *Inipi/Sweat Lodge*

The *Inipi* ceremony or sweat lodge offers a means of purification. The *inipi* can be a ceremony to itself, or it can serve as a prelude to another ceremony such as a vision quest, wedding, or sun dance. The lodge structure consists of a frame made from willow branches tied together in a dome shape, just large enough for a small number of adults to sit around a small pit that is reserved for heated stones. The frame is then covered with tarps and blankets. A small opening is left for entry and exit, but can be closed during the *inipi* ceremony. Participants usually fast prior to participating in the sweat lodge. Two key ceremonial roles include the sweat lodge leader who guides the entire ceremony and a fire keeper who builds a fire to heat the stones

and then brings the stones into the sweat lodge during the ceremony. A total of 28 stones are typically heated. There are four “doors” to the ceremony, with each door seven stones are brought in, the door is closed, and songs are sung and prayers are said as water and herbs such as sage, cedar, and sweet grass are sprinkled onto the red hot rocks, releasing an intensely hot and aromatic steam that fills the lodge (Brown, 1953; Lewis, 1990; Rybak et al., 2004).

In a pilot study, the effect of sweat lodge ceremony for participants was examined (Schiff & Moore, 2006). The results of the study suggested an increase in the level of participant emotional and spiritual wellbeing as a result of their experience of the sweat lodge.

### *Pipe ceremony*

According to Lakota tradition, White Buffalo Cow Woman brought the sacred pipe to the Lakota people (Brown, 1953; Lewis, 1990; Rybak et al., 2004) along with other sacraments. The pipe bowl traditionally is made from red catlinite while the stem is made from a hardwood. The pipe and the stem are kept separated except when they are to be used in ceremony – once joined the ceremony has begun and must be completed. Common tobacco is not used, but instead a mixture of herbs such as red willow and sage. The tobacco is not meant for pleasurable inhalation, but instead is meant as a means to carry prayers upward to the Creator or the Great Mystery. Pipe ceremony is often included as a part of other ceremonies as well, including *inipi*. Participants will stand or sit in a circle and pass the pipe from one to another, smoking and praying. A subject interviewed for this project who was grieving the loss of a son spoke of gaining peace and relief from suffering while participating in the pipe ceremony. She described how the intense grief returned following the ceremony, but that she was able to hold on to the sense of hope offered by the brief respite.

### *Herbs*

Traditionally Native Americans observed the plants within their environments and learned which parts of certain plants contributed to healing. At the time of European arrival, Native Americans experienced a good level of health from their traditional diets and herbal treatments (Null, 1998). Unlike western medicine, it is commonly believed that the beneficial effects are not solely in the herbal medicines, but that the spiritual connection that the healer has with the plants is of great importance (Lame Deer & Erdoes, 1972). Thus, synthetic pharmaceuticals manufactured in the lab would not be equivalent. Healers viewed herbs as one means to bring back balance for an individual with respect to their emotional, intellectual, and spiritual dimensions as well as with the physical (Null, 1998).

### *Application to counseling*

In his description of mental health and wellness among urban American Indians, Gone (2006) stressed that mental health professionals keep a sharp focus on American Indian cultural identity and find ways to support any needed reconstitution of cultural identity in an effort to restore wellness. Gone (2006) also suggested that conventional, mainstream therapeutic efforts may be insufficient

and that mental health professionals should establish ties to the urban American Indian communities.

Garrett and Garrett (1994) noted that traditionally Native Americans visited a Medicine Man for assistance in the healing process. The Medicine Man would often focus on the support system available to the person seeking restoration to health and some type of ceremony to help restore balance to the person's life. The part of focusing on a person's support system is a commonly used in the counseling process, but the second part of incorporating ceremony is not so often used.

Common western psychotherapeutic approaches are frequently at odds with American Indian traditions (McCabe, 2007; McIntire, 1996), while culturally consonant traditional American Indian practices supports indigenous identity as it contributes to the healing process (French, 1997; McCabe, 2007; McCormick, 2000; Morrisette, 2003). After conducting research with respect to indigenous American Indian populations, McCabe (2007) concluded that healing must be based upon the client's native culture that in fact traditionally have methods of healing appropriate to each particular group. Similarly, Garrett and Garrett (1994) suggested that counselors should consider a Native American's situation in the context of their tribal affiliation and sense of spirituality. Garrett and Garrett (1994) underscore the potential values conflict that Native Americans may experience in navigating the differing cultural worlds of mainstream society as contrasted with traditional Native American tribal culture, for example, with respect to the value of cooperation and sharing for many Native Americans versus competition and acquisitiveness as stressed in contemporary US culture.

Garrett (2008) highlighted the importance of identifying the level of acculturation carried by a Native American client. Knowing this will help the counselor to better understand the salience of traditions native to his or her tribal heritage. Garrett furthermore (2008) emphasized the importance of counselor awareness of critical historical and contextual issues such as intergenerational grief created by past traumas through massacres, forced removals, forced indoctrination of children at boarding schools, outlawing Native American spiritual practices, and other oppressive actions. Such events have been disruptive to the sense of harmony and balance for many Native Americans (Garrett, 2008). Restoring harmony is the healing process. Traditional Native American ceremonies can be an integral part of the process to help promote a greater sense of connection to deeper spiritual and emotional issues and contributing to the healing of significant wounds inflicted by traumatic and painful life experiences. Ceremonies and rituals can help activate clients' positive imagery in assisting the restoration of balance in their life. Imagery can be central to the healing process (Garrett & Garrett, 1994). Healing intergenerational grief as an act of community as well as at the family and individual level using both modern and traditional means can be effective (Brave Heart & DeBruyn, 1998).

Duran (2006) took the importance of ceremony to the symbolic level by describing ways in which vexing problems such as alcohol addiction become engrained in a client's life through a kind of unconscious ceremony in which the imbibing of alcohol is imbued with great spiritual power. It is only in the participation in an equally powerful ceremony can the grip of addiction being loosened. Duran (2006) points out that often ceremonies have to be created for the specific issue being dealt with, such as alcoholism. Through such ceremonies alcohol or other substances can be given their due as a powerful medicine that comes

with a type of harmful spiritual influence. In a similar manner other issues such as depression, anxiety, and thoughts of suicide can be addressed in a spiritual manner in order to allow for the client to find a new way of coping with life in a more harmonious way that also honors their own sacred connections to the cosmos.

### Conclusion

Knowledge of Native American culture is essential for counselors to understand more clearly the indigenous psychology underlying Native American healing practices in order to work effectively with Native American clients. Knowledge of the symbolic importance of common ceremonies can deepen a counselors' understanding of Native American spirituality and prepare them for relating in a respectful and cross-culturally competent manner with Native American clients and their families. Finding ways to build relationships with authentic Native American ceremonial leaders can help non-Native counselors to learn more about these practices and to also develop a potential consultant network to support working with Native American clients. Direct participation in Native American community activities helps immerse one in the Native American culture and worldviews, sensitizing counselors to identity and other common issues as well as traditional paths to healing.

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