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Best Practices in Counseling Native Americans

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Best Practices in Counseling Native Americans

What should counselors and psychologists do to make sure their work with Native Americans is culturally appropriate and effective? They should, among other things, build relationships with local Native communities, incorporate attention to spirituality into counseling, and reduce administrative obstacles to receiving care. These recommendations were among those made by mental health professionals who responded to a survey on best practices in counseling Native Americans in early 2011. The opinions of the survey participants provide useful information on how both Native and non-Native counselors and psychologists can improve their services for Native people.

Questions for the survey were developed based on issues identified from a literature search on counseling Native Americans (Gone, 2010; Gone, 2005; Herring, 1999; McCabe, 2007; Trujillo, 2000, etc.). The survey was pilot-tested with a group of Native American psychologists and counselors, and it was revised based on their comments. The final survey had 30 questions, including several closed-end questions and many open-ended questions. Participants in this study were mental health and related professionals who have extensive experience with Native Americans. Most of the respondents were members of the listserv of the Society of Indian Psychologists, and others were experts and specialists who were identified through a search of the literature on counseling Native Americans. The survey took about an hour to complete, and participants were offered a financial stipend to compensate them for their time.

A total of 68 people took the survey, which was administered via the internet; 57% were Native American and 43% were non-Native (White, African American, Hispanic, Latino, Asian, etc.). Survey responses were not analyzed separately for Native and non-Native respondents. Regarding gender, 68% were female and 32% were male. Regarding their profession, forty-two percent of the participants were psychologists, 27% were counselors, 16% were teachers, 16% were researchers, 10% were social workers, and 25% were another related profession (some respondents checked more than one profession so the total exceeds 100%). The majority of the participants (73%) reported that they worked in a counseling center or mental health clinic.

The participants' answers to the survey questions were analyzed to identify the most common responses. The results for several of the survey questions are summarized here (more results of the survey will be published later in this and other professional journals). An article with the complete

survey results on assessment and diagnosis will be published later this year (Thomason, in press).

1. *What should counselors do in the first session to build rapport with Native American clients?* Clients should be welcomed warmly and offered refreshments, such as water, coffee, or tea. Intake paperwork should be minimized and clients should be invited to describe the problem or issue from their point of view. The counselor should use self-disclosure to elicit client talk, and the counselor should be sure to address the role of culture in the client's life. Counselors should talk about confidentiality and expectations for counseling and let the client determine the content of counseling sessions.

2. *Are Native American counselors more effective with Native clients than non-Native counselors, or is there no difference?* Half of the respondents (50%) said that Native American counselors are more effective than non-Natives; 20% said there is no difference; 18% said it depends on the cultural competence of the counselor; and 12% said it depends on how traditional the client is.

3. *What is the most significant barrier that prevents urban Native Americans from getting counseling for their problems?* Many respondents said that stigma, mistrust, or fear of being judged is a barrier. Other barriers identified were lack of money; a shortage of providers; long wait lists; dysfunctional systems of care; and racial discrimination. Presumably the respondents based their answers to this question on their professional experience; a survey of clients and potential clients would also be valuable to collect their opinions regarding barriers to getting counseling.

4. *What should counselors or counseling centers do to make potential Native American clients more comfortable with the idea of getting counseling?* Providers should build relationships with the local Native communities; ask them what they need and how you can help; speak with tribal elders. Make the counseling center environment more welcoming by, for example, having Native art on the walls and providing refreshments.

5. *How important is it to incorporate spirituality into counseling with Native American clients?* A majority (55%) of respondents said that it is very important; 41% said it depends on whether spirituality is important to the client; and only 4% said it is not important.

6. *Should non-Native counselors use Native health practices such as talking circles, purification ceremonies, etc.?* Most respondents (60%) said that this is not appropriate since it may be seen as patronizing and it may be harmful. Many respondents said it would be better for the counselor to refer the client to a Native counselor or healer. However, 30% of the survey respondents

said that using Native health practices may be appropriate if it is done cautiously and if the counselor has been trained in the methods and has tribal approval.

7. *Should all psychological testing with Native clients be avoided, due to potential bias, lack of adequate norms, etc.?* Twelve percent of the survey respondents said “Yes” in answer to this question, but most (73%) said “No,” although many qualified this answer with the statement that psychological testing should be done carefully with due consideration of how the client’s culture may affect the test results.

8. *What should non-Native counselors do to improve their understanding of Native Americans?* Almost all respondents said that counselors should get involved in their local tribal communities. They should meet the tribal elders, find a Native mentor, attend tribal social and cultural events, spend time in the community, attend training workshops, and socialize with Native Americans.

9. *What books should non-Native counselors read to better understand Native Americans?* Respondents listed over 40 books; the most frequently mentioned were the following: *Native American Post-Colonial Psychology*; *Healing the Soul Wound*; *Reclaiming Indigenous Voice and Vision*; and *Decolonizing Mythologies*.

10. *What educational videos and popular movies should non-Native counselors watch to better understand Native Americans?* The most frequently mentioned videos were *The Honour of All: The Story of Alkalai Lake*; *The Red Road to Sobriety*; *Working with Native Americans*; *Counseling and Therapy with Native American Indians*; *Counseling the Native American Client*; and *Innovative Approaches to Counseling Native American Indians*. The most frequently mentioned movies were *Smoke Signals*; *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*; *The Business of Fancydancing*; *Ishi the Last Yahi*; *Powwow Highway*; *The Trail of Tears*; and *500 Nations*.

The results of this survey provide valuable suggestions for how counselors and psychologists can improve their services for Native Americans. The survey results highlight the importance of counselors getting involved in local Native communities and learning as much as they can about Native culture through personal contact, training experiences, and the study of books and videos. Counselors should make sure to minimize barriers as much as possible so that Native clients know about available services and are able to access them easily. Counselors should consider incorporating attention to spirituality into counseling with Native clients, although using Native health practices should be avoided or used cautiously, given the potential for misuse. Following these suggestions will help

counselors and psychologists make their work with Native American clients more culturally appropriate and effective.

Research such as this should be conducted with larger samples of Native American service providers so that the results can be confirmed. There are many additional questions that could be asked that would provide valuable information for counselors. The opinions expressed by the survey respondents should also be studied in controlled research to determine their validity and generalizability. Research on best practices in counseling Native Americans has the potential to greatly improve services for this population.

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