Working with Aboriginal Women: Applying Feminist Therapy in a Multicultural Counselling Context

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ABSTRACT

Counsellor education for working with Aboriginal women must address both culture and gender issues and this may be done by applying feminist theory within a multicultural counselling perspective. This paper explores these perspectives, their application to these women, and specific counsellor education considerations. Issues particular to Aboriginal women are discussed in addition to factors for integrating feminism and multicultural counselling within this context. Once counsellors have an increased awareness of these factors, they may become more effective cross-cultural and feminist counsellors for Aboriginal women.

RÉSUMÉ

La formation des conseillers travaillant avec les femmes des Premières Nations doit traiter à la fois des questions de culture et des questions de genre, et ceci peut se faire en appliquant la théorie féministe dans un contexte de counseling multiculturel. Cette étude examine ces perspectives et leur application à ces femmes ainsi que les considérations en découlant pour leurs conseillers. Les questions particulières aux femmes autochtones y sont étudiées de même que les facteurs permettant d'intégrer, au contexte examiné, le féminisme et le counseling multiculturel. La prise de conscience des facteurs ci-dessus mentionnés permet aux conseillers d'améliorer l'élément féministe et interculturel de leur travail auprès des femmes des Premières Nations.

Counsellor education for working with Aboriginal women (First Nations, Metis, Inuit, and Native Canadians) should consider integrating multicultural and feminist counselling theories. These women have unique strengths, and the experiences of culture, and of being women. They have concerns, problems, and experiences of prejudice that may benefit from counselling that incorporates multicultural and feminist perspectives. In this paper I will explore multicultural and feminist counselling, their application to Aboriginal women, and counsellor education considerations. Some issues specific to this population will be noted in addition to considerations for applying feminist therapy within a multicultural counselling context.

Personal styles of counselling and counsellor education are as varied as counsellors themselves. I am a unique person first and a counsellor second. My professional role becomes clearer with an understanding of who I am culturally, geographically, by status in the larger society, and by my experiences. My family is of European and Aboriginal descent and I grew up on a rural Alberta farm, in a working class family. As a child I spent much time with friends in First Nation

communities (reserves) and enjoyed holidays with cousins, some of whom now have Treaty status. I did not understand that there was a difference then. It was as a teenager that I began to become painfully aware of the local class system that divided us by culture — and left me a member of no particular group — yet my physical appearance and education have afforded me respect as a member of the dominant culture. This sent me on a personal journey in self and cultural exploration which has spilled over to my professional life as a clinical psychologist.

Looking back on my counsellor training, I was inspired by my studies of multicultural and feminist counselling. My challenge has always been to work under these paradigms whether providing clinical treatment for anxiety, supportive counselling for life stressors, or for the existential pursuit of personal or personality exploration. I learn the most from those I am exposed to. Some of the gifts I have received have been from counsellors believing in multicultural or feminist theories and from Aboriginal healers using traditional and non-traditional methods within these paradigms. It is my hope that counsellor education will allow the sanctioned professional healers, or counsellors, to consider integrating these perspectives into their personal counselling styles.

Multicultural Counselling

Culture is an integral part of counselling which is essentially a process of interpersonal interaction, verbal, and nonverbal communication. Each counsellor exists within a unique context of family, community, culture, experiences, and global influences (Locke, 1993, 1992). Counselling with multicultural sensitivity involves counsellor self-awareness and recognizing the impact of culture and values on the client and counsellor in the therapeutic relationship.

Locke (1993) referred to multicultural counselling as the fourth force in psychology. He described it as a lifelong process of self-awareness, skill development, and an awareness of racism, sexism, poverty, individual differences, and other cultures. Multiculturalism allows counsellors to examine and then turn the things that divide us into strengths that unite us (Siegel, 1990).

Culture affects how we see our clients. Assessment is often the foundation of counselling. Assessments can bias when a counsellor uses labelling rather than empirical definitions to solve problems, uses assessment tools normed for the dominant culture, and does not consider cultural implications (Sedlacek & Kim, 1995).

Identification of characteristics of cultures and making comparisons between the dominant culture and culturally different groups are necessary for the development of culturally sensitive counselling strategies. Fundamental to this process is understanding the role of culture in the life of the client and exploring ethnic differences (Locke, 1992). The counsellor must work to identify and respect the client's world view, and ethnic background and must have an awareness of prejudices and biases, which are communicated both verbally and nonverbally, and which can impede the counselling process (Sue & Sue, 1990). Locke (1993) indicated that counsellors must be able to tolerate ambiguity; be

aware of nonverbal communication, be open and honest about racism, express respect and empathy in a way perceivable to the client, personalize counsellor observations, have patience and perseverance, and stay objective until they understand the client's subjective reality. Garrett and Myers (1996) suggest a paradigm, called the Rule of Opposites, to assist counsellors working with Aboriginal people. This model is directed at both the counsellor and client so that they may together learn better ways to recognize and resolve conflict, question others, explore personal choices, and seek a purpose in life.

I strive to be an effective counsellor by incorporating sensitivity and awareness of the impact of cultural differences on the counselling process. This caused me to reevaluate my personal theory of counselling, and to consider how my reactions and distortions may affect culturally different clients. This may involve identifying cultural or sociopolitical forces operating in a situation to understand and be aware of issues (Sue & Sue, 1990). Specifically, I continue to note eye contact in mental status examinations but add a sentence clarifying that infrequent eye contact is common in some expressions of Aboriginal cultures. I often note that infrequent attendance does not necessarily imply resistance and that descriptions of spiritual journeys do not necessarily describe delusions or hallucinations. Personally, I attempt to postpone assessment of potentially cultural constructs until I better understand the client within her own subjective reality.

Feminist Counselling

There is a need for the development of feminist counselling skills (Russel, 1984). There is a need to have counsellors accept, value, and speak for themselves, receive and give support, and learn to initiate personal and professional change (Laidlaw & Malmo, 1990). Feminist counsellors assist women to examine their experiences as females, to learn to accept and value themselves, to give and receive support, and to initiate change. "An important component of feminist therapy is helping women realize that they are the experts when it comes to their own experience" (Laidlaw & Malmo, 1990, p. xiv). Feminist theory sees symptoms of distress as the direct result of the socialized female role, role conflict, societal labelling of role deviancy, and as survival tactics (Sturdivant, 1980b). Feminist counselling also recognises and promotes open discussion of the power difference that exists between the counsellor and client. The former is the socially perceived helper and the latter, she who seeks assistance. Additionally, they will have had different gender experiences, concerns and problems, views on expressing personal attributes, and will have different experiences of racism.

I incorporate the strengths of the feminism counselling perspective into my practice for personal and client benefit. Actively striving for personal and professional change provides me with strength to accompany Aboriginal women on their own journeys. I am a student of the client's strengths, not an expert on their situation. In open dialogues with clients I promote client questions and encourage a focus on balance and cooperation. I also ascribe to the philosophy that we can move the experience of racism from self-blame to one within social context.

Issues Specific to Aboriginal Women

Aboriginal people have specific healing challenges and strengths and counsellors must have at least a minimal understanding of their history and present status (Thomason, 1993). As with other women from ethnic minorities, self-concept, confidence level, and subjective world view of Aboriginal women have evolved from these women's experiences, past and present (Boyd, 1990). This is not a simple process as Aboriginal people represent a large range of cultural understandings, diversities, and uniqueness, and they may have self-definitions which are traditional, assimilated, transitional, or bi-cultural (Vance,1995).

Hodgson (1990) writes that women from these communities face cultural losses from historical events including colonization, residential schools, and an oppressive Child Welfare system. Colonization and residential schools meant the loss of cultural or traditional socialization for generations. This loss was a potential cause of violence, abuse, and unresolved grief from this abandonment (Hodgson, 1990; Daily, 1988). After residential schools, the Child Welfare system removed Aboriginal children from their homes obscuring their culture, heritage, and traditions, including the role of their elders and their sense of spirituality (Daily, 1988).

An understanding of their socioeconomic background, inter-generational differences, cultural development, and the impact of history and sociopolitical forces affect these women's world view and the counselling relationship (Sage, 1997; Sue & Sue, 1990). Present challenges for Aboriginal women include some of the highest death rates due to violence, very high rates of alcoholism and drug abuse, poverty, underemployment, infant mortality, criminally related activities for both genders, and a tendency to believe the myth that addictions cause violence (Hodgson, 1990; McCarthy, Reese, Schueneman, & Reese, 1991; Sugar, 1989). This is often compounded by low levels of education, English as a second language, high stress, low income, inadequate health care, housing problems, and family crisis (Daily, 1988; Laframboise, 1993). Further, psychological issues that are attached to poverty, which is rarely recognized by counsellors (Lerman, 1989), can affect these women's ability to access and receive services that address their particular needs and expectations (James, 1996).

These challenges may be evident in an Aboriginal woman experiencing low self-esteem, lack of confidence, and greater self-effacement (Sturdivant, 1980a). Weak problem-solving skills, parenting skills, and an inability to trust and form intimate relationships may also be present (Daily, 1988). These issues faced by Aboriginal women may be a result of their lesser status, as women with respect to men, and as a Native with respect to the dominant culture (Sturdivant, 1980a). Denial of problems may also be present as these issues may be habitually denied for community loyalty, fear of gossip, group denial, or socialization (Daily, 1988).

Application of these Perspectives for Aboriginal Women. There is a deficit in knowledge about delivering multicultural counselling that is appropriate and ef-

fective for Aboriginal people (Garrett & Garrett, 1998). The counsellor must begin to understand the ethnic and cultural framework that supports the client (Boyd, 1990). Often non-Native clinicians believe they know what is best for Native clients (Hodgson, 1990) but this rarely involves an understanding of these women's remarkable strengths in the face of such challenges. Aboriginal women have ethnic and cultural sources of strength including strong values of sharing, cooperation, noninterference, time orientation, extended family orientation, and harmony with nature (Sue & Sue, 1990). Aboriginal people have a more collective orientation toward life (McCormick, 1997), as seen in behaviours relating to interdependency and the common practice of sharing. Even issues that may be seen by the majority culture as pathological (ie., denial of issues for community loyalty, greater self-effacement), may actually be legitimate survival responses (Boyd, 1990). Out of necessity, many Aboriginal women may also have the benefit of having become bi-cultural.

Typical counsellor education may be antagonistic to Aboriginal experiences and cultural values (Atkinson, Morten, & Sue, 1993). Training for effective cross-cultural work begins with self-awareness training (Locke, 1992), followed by education about the culture of Aboriginal people and the role of these women in their communities. This process may mean consultation with more experienced counsellors, healers, and elders, an awareness of personal communication style limitations, and an anticipation of the potential impact of multicultural issues (Sue & Sue, 1990). Some multicultural counsellors must also obtain an objective perspective on the influence of their unconscious white, heterosexual, middle-class privilege. Training or preparation must in-clude anti-racism and multicultural workshops. Counsellors should also review their reinforcements for developing a commitment to multicultural counselling, and should consider seeking counselling from outside their own culture (Lerman, 1989).

For my counsellor education this meant an emphasis on the development of ongoing self-awareness about myself as a counsellor, my mixed cultural heritage, values, prejudices, and beliefs as an ongoing process (Sue & Sue, 1990). Education about the culture of Aboriginal women became my responsibility to discover, not their responsibility to provide. I did research, attended workshops, and spoke with elders, healers, friends, and family who may have been able to share this information. I am also active with Mannawanis, my local Native Friendship Centre and frequently consult with Aboriginal counsellors and health care providers.

I attempt to reinforce these women's strengths within my own practice. I begin by introducing myself, my cultural membership, and by offering the client an opportunity to introduce her own cultural reality. With utmost respect, I integrate smudges with those Aboriginal women who chose this practice, and have had my office blessed by an elder. At the client's request, or my invitation, family members may attend sessions. These techniques involve a dance between providing choice yet intervention without misinterpreting cultural behaviour (Laframboise, Trimble, & Mohatt, 1993).

Counsellors must also consider possible risks when working under a multicultural counselling paradigm. When a counsellor is being cautious not to draw conclusions from differences in eye contact, family, or community roles, they may be postponing essential components of assessment or overlooking potentially valuable information. Body language and nonverbal behaviour may also be culturally conditioned, with meaning strongly linked to culture (Sue & Sue, 1990), but this may also be representative of psychological conditions or personality styles. Education about Aboriginal people may indicate that common communication styles include: speaking slowly and softly, gazing indirectly when listening or speaking, interjecting less, seldom offering encouraging communication, using silence, and using a low-keyed manner of expression (Sue & Sue, 1990). However, accepting this as a label of expected behaviour can produce counsellor bias and overshadow possibilities for personal diversity among Aboriginal women.

Feminist counselling perspectives can also be applied to work with Aboriginal women. This requires that the counsellor provides a positive evaluation of Aboriginal women, facilitates a social analysis, encourages total development, provides behavioural feedback, and uses appropriate self-disclosure (Russel, 1984). Traditional counselling may ignore this necessary focus on social causes of illness and community cohesion (Laframboise, Trimble, & Mohatt, 1993). To begin understanding the subjective world view of the client is the first step in empowering a female client from a Aboriginal community.

There are specific feminist techniques I use with Aboriginal women in my practice in a public mental health clinic. If she is feeling powerless, I may examine with her the source, provide education, and then work cooperatively with the client so she can experience power. I give my clients permission to feel and express anger directly and effectively (Burtle, 1985; Collier, 1982). I may also use the therapeutic setting so she can experience interdependence, direction, work with boundaries, and evaluate rules and expectations (Collier, 1982).

A criticism of using feminist counselling for Aboriginal women is that, as members of a minority group, Aboriginal women are at risk to absorb some of the untruths created by the dominant society (Sturdivant, 1980a). We risk devaluing these women's culture in an attempt to convert them to a "better" culture (Anderson & Ellis, 1995). Whether integrating multiculturalism or feminism, the counsellor must consider whether or not these perspectives support or contrast with traditional healing that an Aboriginal woman may practice.

Traditional Healing

There is a movement toward the empowerment of Aboriginal people by employing both culturally unique and traditional Aboriginal counselling techniques (Laframboise, Trimble, & Mohatt, 1993). An awareness of these techniques and strategies that may be most effective for Aboriginal women is essential. This may mean a consideration of the Native stress on health, balance, and spirituality in

addition to emotional support (Laidlaw & Malmo, 1990). Traditional Native healing resources reinforce these women's strengths. I have been told that women, within the Cree culture, have great power and connection to the Creator. As females and mothers, they have a special place within ceremonies, the culture, and the community, and traditionally their role has been a spiritual one (Brucker & Perry, 1998). Boyd (1990) states that, in times of crisis, women will often seek their ethnic and cultural traditions to reawaken their personal strengths. McCormick (1997) found that Aboriginal people have successfully managed their own healing by: establishing social connections, anchoring self in traditions, exercise and self-care, involvement in challenging activities, self expression, establishing Spirituality, helping others, understanding their problems, learning from role models, and establishing a connection with nature. Boyd (1990) concurs, explaining that by calling on their traditional teachings and culture, these women may gain a unique sense of personal power.

Many specific examples are provided in literature. Boyd (1990) tells of an Aboriginal woman retreating to her community for ritual meditation and ceremonial sweats to purify her mind, body, and soul after a brutal rape. Native storytelling may serve as powerful metaphors for healing (Dion-Buffalo, 1990). Other resources may include Native dancing, singing, sweat lodge healing ceremonies, dieting, and exercising (Hodgson, 1990). Common counselling techniques that may support traditional Aboriginal healing may be person-centred, social learning, behavioural, and network therapy (Laframboise, Trimble, & Mohatt, 1993). McCormick & Amundson (1997) recommended a communal counselling process focussing on connectedness, balance, needs, roles, gifts, and values. Physical body work, art, drawings, and visualization can also be significant (Dufrene, 1994; Hodgson, 1990). Techniques that support traditional healing can be clarified by community leaders and elders who should have input in counselling programs and counsellor education (Vance, 1995).

The counsellor must consider not only their techniques, but how their use of the multicultural or feminist perspective affects traditional healing. Multicultural counselling may recommend counsellor awareness of traditional techniques which the Aboriginal woman considers sacred. It may promote understanding and support of her incorporating the use of these techniques with her counselling process. Feminist techniques to assist an Aboriginal woman to independently develop previously limited behaviours and emotions may threaten her interdependance on significant others. Aboriginal women, however, may be able to take their enhanced experience of power and share that within their personal circles.

Integrating Feminist Therapy with Multicultural Counselling for Aboriginal Women

The use of mental health services by minorities demonstrate that services must become more responsive (Brucker & Perry, 1998). Traditional counsellor education may be falling short, and does not necessarily include the skills necessary for effective results with Aboriginal people (Herring, 1992). Counsellors preparing

to work with Aboriginal women must recognize the pull between tradition and majority culture (Thomason, 1993) and the gender issues in both cultures. Providing feminist therapy within a multicultural counselling context requires that the counsellor works with Aboriginal women within their environments, considering both their internal perceptions and external realities (Collier, 1982 ; Lerman, 1989). Solutions will be as unique as these women themselves, and individuals and their environments will respond to values, attitudes, and behaviour generated in therapy (Collier, 1982). When the service is not meeting the Aboriginal woman's needs, counsellors of these women must evaluate the service that they are providing.

Feminist counselling alone is not enough since any perspective that denies the validity of ethnic and cultural experiences cannot be therapeutic (Boyd, 1990). While Aboriginal women may have personal and social powerlessness by virtue of their gender, it is their culture that assists them in understanding situations and making choices (Sieber & Cairns, 1991). The counsellor must welcome the client's inquiry about the counsellor's values, orientation, and methods. This may mean a process of value negotiation between the counsellor and client, using potential counsellor-client value conflicts to achieve a consensus about interventions to best serve the Aboriginal woman (Merali, 1999). These women should be encouraged to be educated and conscientious consumers, and be encouraged to take an active part in decisions about their therapy (Laidlaw & Malmo, 1990).

For some counsellors, integrating feminist and multicultural perspectives may not be compatible with their current theoretical perspective, strategies, or techniques. Providing counselling for Aboriginal women may mean that the counsellor will once again become a student (Boyd, 1990). It is the client's definition of counselling, within the parameters of what the counsellor is competent, able, and prepared to offer, that will be the beneficial service.

An important consideration for preparing to deliver counselling services to Aboriginal women is that the counsellor cannot be simply reactive. It is always to society's benefit to be pro-active by actively practising and promoting anti-racism (Rave, 1990). Counsellors need to become educated about women's issues, the culture of Aboriginal peoples, and the need to educate others. It is essential to recognize that women and minorities have unequal power in relationships with males, and in social and political arenas (Sieber & Cairns, 1991), and to recognize and challenge systems that discriminate against Aboriginal women. As counsellors and professionals, we have an influence on the majority culture which composes our government, and we can empower Aboriginal women to influence Aboriginal governments. Finally, counsellor educators must involve policy and action for providing services to Aboriginal women in their programs. Laframboise (1993) suggests recruiting Aboriginal people to the profession, adding multicultural training specific to Aboriginal people, including community-based practicum internships, ensuring that counsellor trainees build clients strengths within their natural community networks, and promoting involvement in all levels of professional and government organization.

CONCLUSION

Once counsellors have increased sensitivity they may become more effective cross-cultural and feminist counsellors for Aboriginal women. Counsellor education must provide the opportunity for counsellors to consider integrating multicultural and feminist perspectives to further enhance the healing for these women. Aboriginal women have specific healing challenges and strengths. Counsellor education must include an understanding of the practical, theoretical, and socio-political issues relating to counselling Aboriginal women and make counsellors sensitive to the implications of our similarities and differences.

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