
Alliance Skill Development within Canadian First Nations and Aboriginal Counsellor Education

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ABSTRACT

Although a focus on counsellor-client alliance is prominent within counsellor education, specific skills that compose this aspect of the helping process remain nebulous. As such, faculty and students have relied on general guidelines and suggestions regarding the engagement process. Research conducted by Bedi, Davis, and Arvay (2005), however, has been instrumental in reversing this trend and provides an excellent foundation with which to better understand elements essential to the alliance process. This article discusses these findings in relation to Canadian First Nations and Aboriginal (FNA) counsellor education and emphasizes cultural imperatives and practices.

RÉSUMÉ

Bien qu'une concentration sur l'alliance entre le conseiller et le client figure au premier plan dans la formation des conseillers, les compétences précises dont cet aspect du processus d'aide est composé demeurent nébuleuses. À ce titre, les professeurs et les étudiants se sont fiés aux lignes directrices et suggestions générales concernant le processus d'engagement. Des recherches menées par Bedi, Davis, et Arvay (2005) ont toutefois contribué à renverser cette tendance et fournissent un excellent fondement pour mieux comprendre les éléments essentiels du processus d'alliance. Le présent article traite ces constatations en ce qui concerne la formation des conseillers canadiens autochtones et des Premières nations et met l'accent sur les impératifs et les pratiques culturelles.

Undergraduate counselling students frequently express trepidation regarding the intricacies of the counselling process. Particular anxiety pertains to initial client contact and relationship formation. Despite a genuine interest in helping others, students gradually reveal their inexperience, lack of confidence, and sense of vulnerability when it comes to actual interactions with clients. Such disclosure is welcomed and considered an essential part of student growth and development (Morrisette, 1996).

Undergraduate students have rarely had the opportunity to engage clients and thus fear making mistakes, harming clients, and receiving a poor performance review. Even during role plays, students struggle to tap into their natural engagement skills and seek support and direction while working toward forming therapeutic alliances. In essence, after discovering more about the complexity inherent in the helping relationship, students begin to question their suitability for the counselling profession, their clinical competency, and their ability to orchestrate an interview.

The challenges associated with engaging clients and fostering alliances is not limited to any one student population. However, it remains an expressed concern for First Nations and Aboriginal (FNA) students who may choose to work in either small remote areas with minimal support or larger urban areas with both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal clientele. For students within the former category, there is concern regarding their ability to engage older adults/Elders, clients with serious mental health challenges, and individuals who are familiar with their life history. When this issue is broached, students express a sense of vulnerability and question whether they can establish appropriate parameters and boundaries when transitioning from the role of friend or relative to that of helper. Maintaining dual relationships is a delicate issue for students who wish to remain connected to their extended families and communities while serving as helping professionals (Nigro & Uhlemann, 2004; Wihak & Merali, 2003). Students do not want to appear arrogant or aloof, but at the same time they realize the importance of professionalism. Embedded in this issue is the importance attributed to connectedness and belonging within Aboriginal communities (LaFromboise, 1988; LaFromboise, Trimble, & Mohatt, 1990). The notion of providing service to non-Aboriginals also creates anxiety when students question whether they will be able to make the required adjustments when interacting with clients from different cultures (Uhlemann, Dong, & France, 1988). As such, students remain apprehensive without a skill set upon which to rely for direction.

From the outset, communication and cultural differences that exist between FNA and mainstream society must be acknowledged within the context of counsellor education. Although a comprehensive review of the literature concerning these differences is beyond the scope of this article, various authors (e.g., AuCoin, 1997; Clark & Kelley, 1992; Herring, 1990; Hunter, Logan, Goulet, & Barton, 2006; McCormick, 1996; McCormick & Ishiyama, 2000; Morrisette, 1991; Olson, 2003; Wihak & Merali, 2005) provide overviews that include worldview, balance and harmony, interconnectedness, and spirituality.

THE MAP AND TERRITORY

In addressing counsellor-client alliance formation, Bedi et al. (2005) utilized the critical incident technique to identify ingredients that compose a skill set that, until recently, has been absent. This research is invaluable for a number of reasons. First, the results are based on credible research design and analysis rather than anecdotal reports. Notwithstanding the limitations of this preliminary research (e.g., all non-Native research participants, small sample of nine participants), students from all levels of counsellor education wonder aloud whether the extant literature accurately reflects client experience. The aforementioned research begins to answer this question and reflects client perspectives rather than theory. Second, the various ingredients presented in the research can be adapted to undergraduate counsellor education. Exposing undergraduate students to such knowledge provides them with a solid foundation upon which to advance their skills. Bedi

et al. assert, "it is incumbent upon counsellor educators to provide students with a comprehensive understanding of the construct of the alliance and the necessary skills to build and maintain effective alliances with their clients (e.g., alliance formation competence)" (p. 71). Third, these research findings provide much more detail than previously available. As accurately noted by the authors, literature specific to alliance formation skills is scant. Information provided by the authors advances our understanding, gives voice to clients, and provides a roadmap to students at all levels of counsellor education.

A RETURN TO COUNSELLING BASICS

According to the extant literature, there is no evidence confirming the superiority of any one single therapeutic approach (Smith & Morrissette, 2001). In summarizing the outcome research literature, Miller, Hubble, and Duncan (1995) remarked, "Yet while the number of therapy models has proliferated, mushrooming from 60 to more than 400 since the mid-1960's, 30 years of clinical outcome research have not found any one theory, model, method or package of techniques to be reliably better than any other" (p. 54). Outcome research overviews (e.g., Institute for the Study of Therapeutic Change, 2006) indicate that different models of counselling work equally well. Specific to FNA clinical intervention, AuCoin (1997) states that little has been done "to determine effective and culturally sensitive therapeutic approaches and techniques" (p. 78). Similarly, McCormick (1998) points to the lack of empirical studies that examine the effectiveness of specific counselling approaches with First Nations clients and asserts, "Without an accurate and sensitive understanding of the culture under study, the research outcomes are likely to fall short of methodological validity and/or pragmatic value" (p. 293). That said, McCormick and France (1995) cite several approaches (e.g., behavioural, social skills training, and network therapy) that they believe hold promise in terms of intervention with FNA clientele.

Rather than promoting change strategies, Bedi et al. (2005) underscore reciprocity and bi-directionality within the alliance-building process and focus on fundamental elements that serve to enhance the therapeutic relationship. Inherent in this process is the issue of trust between students and clients. According to Miller et al. (1995), "the latest thinking and research indicate that strong alliances are formed when clients perceive the therapist as warm, trustworthy, nonjudgmental, and empathic" (p. 56). Due to historical and current circumstances, trust is a specific aspect of counselling that holds particular significance to FNA counselling (Morrissette, 1994). Among others (e.g., Everett, Proctor, & Cartmell, 1983; McCormick & France, 1995), LaFromboise et al. (1990) contend, "Given historical and contemporary oppression and cultural clashes associated with the act of seeking help, trustworthiness probably is more important for Indians than it is for non Indians seeking psychological assistance" (p. 634).

The following commentary speaks to each major research category outlined by Bedi et al. (2005) as it applies to FNA undergraduate counsellor education. Fur-

ther, the challenges experienced by FNA students during this specific stage of counselling and remediation strategies are illustrated in the vignettes below. Throughout the vignettes, the interfacing and melding of mainstream counselling skills and the Seven Grandfather Teachings of wisdom, truth, humility, bravery, honesty, love, and respect are interwoven (Seventh Fire Education Center, 2006).

The content of the following commentaries is based on personal observations by the first author as well as conversations with colleagues and students over the course of 10 years in a variety of Canadian and American counsellor education and human service education programs. To ensure confidentiality and protect identification, pseudonyms are used and clinical contexts and dilemmas have been altered. Further, it is obvious that the following vignettes can be interpreted in numerous ways. The intention of a vignette is not to provide a definitive interpretation and corresponding solution, but rather to stimulate thinking and dialogue. Without question, one's theoretical preference and subsequent clinical lens will influence how he or she interprets and reacts to each vignette. Finally, it is conceded that similar challenges are common to students from a variety of cultures and therefore not limited to FNA students. Moreover, the worldview and value system of FNA student counsellors hinge on several factors, including tribal customs, level of acculturation, and other personal characteristics. As McCormick (1998) fittingly pointed out, "a 'First Nations worldview' is not something that can be generalized to all First Nations people" (p. 288).

AREA I. GENERAL COUNSELLING SKILLS

Notable challenges encountered by FNA students within the general counselling skills area include the elements that compose SOLER (squarely, open, lean, eye, relaxed) (Bedi et al., 2005), the sharing of personal experiences, the offering of opinions, direction, challenging behaviour, and prompting. A review of each skill area is discussed below.

SOLER

The issue of personal space and freedom is particularly important to FNA students. Due to cultural practices, students are reluctant to behave in ways that can be perceived as intrusive (Morrisette, 1991; Sullivan, 1983; Wihak & Merli, 2003) or disrespectful (Everett et al., 1983). Thus, inviting students to relax as they sit squarely to clients, maintain an open posture, lean forward, and maintain eye contact is foreign and disquieting to many students. While attempting to assume this position, students frequently express a level of discomfort that impedes or restricts their interactions. Research conducted by AuCoin (1997) suggests that eye contact between helping professionals and FNA clientele is less direct and less frequent. Moreover, FNA clients can attribute multiple meanings to less eye contact, including respect, deference to an Elder, anger, and distrust. Factors such as gender, age, cultural assimilation, and familiarity, however, must be considered regarding this specific dimension of the therapeutic relationship.

VIGNETTE

During a role play designed to experience the various steps within the intake process, Freda sat in front of a male client and proceeded to ask questions without making eye contact. Although Freda exhibited skill in the selection and pacing of questions, she continually shifted her body during the interview process and became increasingly focused on the intake form (thus avoiding direct eye contact). When discussing her experience during a class discussion, Freda spoke about her discomfort with sitting squarely in front of the client while attempting to keep eye contact. From her perspective, this style felt too aggressive and she feared “staring down” the client and creating unnecessary tension. Although attempting to assume this position, Freda felt uneasy. Based on Freda’s experience, the class discussed ways in which adjustments could be made in order for Freda to feel natural and comfortable. During the conversation with her peers, Freda pondered whether sitting at an angle (rather than squarely) with clients would help her relax and prompt a degree of eye contact that would acknowledge clients and enhance her comfort level. Freda also remarked on the value she placed on counsellor non-verbal behaviour and intonation. In her opinion, she would be able to effectively communicate warmth and empathy through facial expressions (e.g., smiling), physical touch, and her soft and reassuring voice.

Sharing of Personal Experiences

The sharing of personal experiences can be a powerful engagement strategy but requires careful monitoring. FNA students commonly believe that clients will like them more or will feel better understood if personal information is revealed. From their perspective, sharing similar experiences would enhance their credibility since it would demonstrate experience, knowledge, and insight. In discussing counsellor self-disclosure within a FNA context, Everett et al. (1983) reported, “Self-disclosing on the part of the psychologist may well generate more useful information than direct interrogation” (p. 593). However, due to an anxiety that is fueled by an overall need to be accepted by clients and approved by faculty and peers, students are at risk of disclosing information that is untimely or inappropriate. Although well intended, this information can overwhelm clients and bring into question student well-being and competency. Further, students may eventually regret the fact that they placed themselves in a vulnerable position or revealed private information that was open for public scrutiny.

VIGNETTE

During an interview at the women’s shelter, Susan quickly became immobilized as her client discussed a personal story of childhood abandonment. As the client revealed her unresolved sorrow, tears formed in Susan’s eyes and she had a sudden urge to relieve the client of her obvious emotional pain. To help her client, Susan interrupted the process and began to share her own abuse history and the anger she held toward her perpetrator. As Susan later processed the interview with her supervisor, she discussed her need to commiserate with the client but was unsure

of what was accomplished. Susan was also surprised at how emotional she became when hearing a story reminiscent of her own experience. Susan agreed that there were unresolved issues that required attention and agreed to pursue individual counselling while fulfilling her practicum obligations.

Prompting

A number of issues arise in the area of prompting and attempts to encourage client responses. For example, there are students who have been told during their high school years, within their community, or during their community college experience that they are gifted or natural helpers. Consequently, they enter counsellor education eager to prove themselves and demonstrate their skills. These students, however, sometimes believe that that they have a reputation to uphold. There are also students who resist feedback and underestimate the work and skill necessary to the counselling process. On the other hand, there are students who are unaccustomed to the process of prompting and appear emotionless. These students tend to equate prompting with intrusiveness and believe that simply being present and acknowledging client despair is sufficient intervention. While discussing perceived interference or coercion during interactions, Good Tracks (1973) asserts that traditional Aboriginal societies were organized on the principle of voluntary cooperation and avoided coercion. He goes on to say, "The Indian child is taught that complete noninterference in interaction with all people is the norm, and that he should react with amazement, irritation, mistrust, and anxiety to even the slightest indication of manipulation or coercion" (p. 31).

VIGNETTE

Jeremy received high praise from his high school teachers and peers for his willingness to extend himself to others. For example, Jeremy encouraged others to pursue their goals and would not hesitate to support others through difficult times. Jeremy's endless enthusiasm, however, was not received as well within the counsellor education program. Some of the older students questioned what appeared to be insincere robotic and patronizing responses. During group debriefing, Jeremy's age and lack of life experience was raised. Although his classmates admired Jeremy's academic accomplishments, he was reminded that personal experience teaches patience and that his pacing required refinement. Although humbled by this feedback, Jeremy appreciated the supportive advice and agreed to consider modifying his approach with the help of his peers and faculty.

Opinions, Direction, and Challenges

Perhaps one of the greatest hurdles for students is gaining the necessary confidence to share opinions, offer direction, or challenge others. This challenge may be greater for FNA students who tend to equate directives and challenging behaviour with rudeness. Although students will offer opinions when asked, a willingness to direct others or confront faulty thinking or behaviours is less forthcoming. There is a general apprehension about inadvertently offending or imposing oneself on

others. Deciding when to share an opinion, direct, or challenge clients is a learning process and hinges on unique client needs and client empowerment. LaFromboise et al. (1990) write,

The goal of empowerment is to do whatever possible so that clients can control their own lives; the underlying assumption is that people are capable of taking control but are unable to do so because of social forces and institutions that are hindering their efforts. (p. 637)

When inviting client empowerment, students focus on client strengths and capacity building (McMillen, Morris, & Sherraden, 2004). Regardless of one's therapeutic strategy, it is imperative that counsellors demonstrate genuine empathy and concern.

VIGNETTE

As a practicum student within a substance abuse treatment program, Matt participated as a co-facilitator in group counselling and was responsible for a very small, supervised caseload that involved weekly individual counselling sessions. Shortly into his practicum, it became apparent that Matt devoted a great deal of clinical time simply reflecting back client feelings. Rarely would Matt offer an opinion or confront clients on their self-defeating thinking or behaviour. Matt struggled to help clients elaborate or reflect upon their dilemmas. Often the conversational flow between Matt and clients would stall as Matt would engage in minimal conversation or emotional expression. During co-counselling, Matt's supervisor noticed how Matt's clients began to appear uninterested. When Matt's counselling style was explored during supervision, it was revealed that he did not think he had the right to direct people or question their lifestyle. Rather, he was more comfortable being present, being supportive, and serving as a role model. When explored further, Matt discussed the importance he assigned to humility and his fear of being viewed as arrogant or superior. To assist Matt, his supervisor agreed to demonstrate a respectful form of directive counselling. During the co-counselling sessions Matt began to slowly recognize the potential value of sharing beliefs and providing direction. To Matt's surprise, his clients appeared more animated and responsive to this counselling style.

AREA 2: EXPRESSION OF POSITIVE AFFECT AND SENTIMENT

The expression of positive student counsellor affect (emotion) and sentiment (e.g., attitude or thought) hinges on the student's personal experiences and disposition. AuCoin (1997) writes,

It was found that the direct expression of a lot of intense feeling is often considered indulgent and weak by many Native Americans. A number of different reasons for this attitude were cited: all of the reasons related to the tremendous amount of trauma Native Americans have experienced throughout generations. (p. 67)

For example, while some students have enjoyed relatively stable lives, others report tragic and chaotic histories resulting in sadness, anger, or personal doubt. Expecting these individuals to instantly shift gears and assume a more positive

stance is naïve and unreasonable. Students often require time during their undergraduate years to grapple with personal issues and consider life from a different perspective (Morrisette, 1999). This reflective process applies to students of all ages and oftentimes entails moving from a victim role to that of a professional helper. Corey (2001) notes, "If we hope as counselors to promote growth and change in our clients, we must be willing to promote growth in our own lives" (p. 15). It can be difficult for some students to grapple with their past. However, a number of factors including a positive university environment/experience, a basic understanding of human development and behaviour, and personal counselling can assist in the growth process.

The value attributed to humour within the First Nations and Aboriginal community (Garrett, Garrett, Torres-Rivera, Wilbur, & Roberts-Wilbur, 2005; Herring & Meggert, 1994) is certainly a perceived advantage for FNA students. An ability to see humour in a variety of situations should not be seen as a sign of disrespect or indifference but rather as an outstanding characteristic that is learned early in life. Herring and Meggert note that, "Whether it is in reference to paradox, the ironic, the unanticipated, or the situation, Native American Indians use humor's ability to erase, cleanse, or change what was embarrassing, oppressive, sorrowful, or painful" (§ 4). Playful teasing, for example, is considered a bonding strategy, and thus receives a great deal of attention among students. During conversations regarding this behaviour, an important distinction is drawn between playful teasing and what can be perceived as harassment. This cultural aspect is especially important for students who wish to work in a mainstream counselling context. Within this latter context, due to harassment policies, teasing may not be tolerated however innocent the intention.

VIGNETTE

Despite an upbeat and progressive student cohort, Stuart remained sullen and often cynical about positive client behaviour change. Based on what he had witnessed in his own family and community, Stuart's cynicism was understandable, as was his skepticism regarding whether change could be sustained over the long term. As a result of his first practicum at a youth group along with supervision, Stuart's disposition began to gradually change. During group discussions with his supervisor and peers, Stuart was encouraged to search for hidden strengths and small attitudinal changes in the youth. When queried about his practicum experiences, Stuart discussed how he found himself encouraging youngsters to work toward their personal and clinical objectives. Stuart further described the positive interactions he had with the children and how he enjoyed their playful interactions. Despite witnessing some unfortunate personal life events, Stuart was most impressed with the ability of residents to stabilize and move forward in their young lives.

AREA 3: COUNSELLING ENVIRONMENT

FNA students appear to intuitively understand the value attributed to the environment and freely discuss the importance of ambiance that is couched in respect

and trust. For example, students speak with excitement about the significance of aroma and cultural décor. The lingering aroma of sweetgrass coupled with a stunning star blanket, for example, invites conversation, trust, and reflection. In short, these elements contribute to a sacred environment. To honour and carry on their rich culture, students place chairs and tables in a circle to enhance the learning environment. Students are eager to share their vision of a healing environment. As alluded to earlier, however, the importance of assessing the diverse and unique needs of clients and avoiding generalizations cannot be overemphasized.

VIGNETTE

Patricia felt very much at home during her practicum at the local friendship centre. She enjoyed working with individuals and groups and participated in several cultural functions. As Patricia's experience progressed her confidence grew, and she began to suggest ways in which to enhance the cultural ambiance of the counselling centre. With the support of her supervisor, Patricia approached the program's Elders and shared her ideas. To her delight, the Elders encouraged her to slowly integrate her ideas into the existing milieu. After careful reflection and consultation with colleagues, Patricia and her partner volunteered to paint a small interview room and hang Native art and symbols on the walls. Patricia's effort underscored both her commitment to the friendship centre and her desire to create a welcoming and comforting space for clients.

AREA 4. TRACKING THE COUNSELLING PROCESS

This area requires that students manage their anxiety and control their need to change or fix clients. Although based on good intentions, a student's eagerness to help may be misconstrued and prove detrimental to the therapeutic process. In addressing the concept of non-interference within the clinical context, for example, Good Tracks (1973) suggests that "[c]oercion appears to be a fundamental element in the peoples of Western Europe and their colonial descendants" (p. 30). In contrast, he notes, "In native Indian society, however, no interference or meddling of any kind is allowed or tolerated, even when it is to keep the other person from doing something foolish or dangerous" (p. 30).

During the tracking process students must first monitor their own internal dialogue and behavioural responses. In doing so, students are better equipped to monitor information and client behaviour. Students are encouraged to enter into a self-supervision (Morrissette, 2002) mode whereby they attend to how they feel before, during, and after the therapeutic process. Once they begin to regulate themselves, they may be in a better position to track client progress and therapeutic interactions. The intricacies of the counselling process can seem overwhelming for students who are only getting to know themselves (Morrissette, 1996).

VIGNETTE

Debbie found herself becoming quickly overwhelmed during the role play of an assessment interview. Immediately after the interview began, the client recited

a litany of personal issues and problems. Unsure of how to regulate the pace of the interview and the flow of information, Debbie became silent and turned to her colleagues for help. While sharing her experience, Debbie conceded that she was unaccustomed to someone sharing such personal information at such a rapid pace.

To assist Debbie and her peers, the instructor underscored the need for counsellors to set the tone and direction of treatment. A difference was drawn between fighting for control and establishing parameters in a respectful manner. Moreover, Debbie and her colleagues were introduced to the prioritization of client needs as well as the value in setting small, obtainable objectives. This practical information helped to reassure Debbie while providing her with a much needed sense of direction.

AREA 5: PUNCTUALITY AND USE OF TIME

The importance of punctuality within a clinical context cannot be overstated. Undergraduate students may not understand how this aspect of counselling factors into the larger picture—particularly the client-counsellor alliance. Within short order, students learn how punctuality demonstrates respect and organizational skills. Interestingly, prior to formal counsellor education many students tend to perceive counselling with a *laissez-faire* attitude. Little importance is placed on time or planning. As they become immersed in counsellor education, they soon realize that counselling is not a social event but rather a rigorous enterprise requiring discipline. Furthermore, a focus is placed on respectful counsellor behaviour and client well-being, and importance is placed on starting and ending interviews promptly.

Embedded in this specific area are the differing concepts of time across cultures. According to Everett et al. (1983), traditional American Aboriginal peoples are not taught “the linear view of time and its consequent rules” (p. 598). This view should not be misinterpreted, however, since FNA peoples have had to maintain a keen sense of timing, planning, and organization in order to ensure their survival.

VIGNETTE

During a group counselling role play, one group participant began chit-chatting with another participant while the leaders were attempting to facilitate treatment. The leaders appeared distracted and annoyed with the disruptive behaviour. Halfway through the role play a participant left the group and returned after making his entrance known through needless noise. As the students analyzed the role play, the behaviours of the two participants were highlighted. There was general agreement that the participants displayed inconsiderate and disrespectful behaviour. The students noted that each interruption interfered with the group process. To the students’ surprise the instructor noted that similar behaviours were exhibited by students during the first class. The instructor further noted that if such inappropriate behaviour is left unchecked it can be perceived as normal and acceptable. The purpose of the exercise was to emphasize the importance of professional decorum within the counselling context.

AREA 6: GOING BEYOND NORMATIVE EXPECTATIONS

Everett et al. (1983) identify giving, sharing, and cooperation as valued practices among traditional people. These practices are evident when students freely contribute to group meals, share in the preparation process, and selflessly assist fellow students when necessary. Once again, a willingness to share speaks to a sense of community, and this virtue lends itself to the counselling process. To their credit, students intuitively show genuine concern for clients during role plays and practicum experiences. To balance the instinctive desire to share, the establishment of counsellor-client boundaries is also reinforced to ensure student well-being. When there is a clash between traditional values and professional ethical guidelines, however, students are likely to experience a degree of cognitive dissonance, and thus require consultation to avoid ethical violations.

VIGNETTE

Jennifer took pride in her willingness to extend herself to others. As a matter of fact, other students would seek out Jennifer when a ride or class notes were needed. Clearly Jennifer was proud of her generosity and the popularity she enjoyed within her peer group. Unfortunately, despite her good intentions, Jennifer was reprimanded at her practicum for providing an adult client with bus fare in order to attend a job interview. Jennifer tried to justify her kindness but was surprised when her actions were framed as undermining and disrespectful. During a candid meeting that included Jennifer, the program director, and the faculty advisor, it was reiterated that clients within the program were expected to walk or arrange for transportation to job interviews. Jennifer admitted to knowing the program rules and shared how she felt sorry for the client. Jennifer was reminded that clients received ample funding while in the program, and their ability to manage their finances was critical to program integrity. As a supportive measure, and to maintain her placement, Jennifer agreed to review the Canadian Counselling Association code of ethics (Canadian Counselling Association, 2006) and to speak with her supervisor about her need for client approval and professional boundaries.

AREA 7: PERSONAL ATTRIBUTES OF THE COUNSELLOR

Undergraduate students are generally younger than and lack the credentials or poise of their graduate counterparts. Furthermore, students are unfamiliar with or initially snub or downplay the importance of attire, behaviour, and physical presentation. Students who initially resist a professional image believe that clients will feel uncomfortable with counsellors who appear superior either through attire or behaviour. This reaction can sometimes be traced back to student self-esteem and reluctance to transition from student to professional. In general, the issue of counsellor attire has received limited attention. Nevertheless, the extant research provides valuable clues for aspiring professionals. For example, Heitmeyer and Goldsmith (1990) argue that, “[c]lothes do make a difference in impression formations” (p. 928), and therefore should be an important consideration for

practicing and aspiring counsellors. These authors further write, “The personal characteristics of the counselor that may be perceived initially on the basis of dress may largely affect the final impression and, as a consequence, may also affect the outcome of counseling” (p. 928). These findings support earlier research by Littrell and Littrell (1982, 1983) pertaining to FNA counselling and nonverbal cues. Although the latter research was limited to high school students, it provides useful information. Essentially, these authors discovered that FNA clients associated attire with counsellor knowledge and competence. For instance, “In the follow-up discussions the Indian students perceived the counselors in slacks and sweaters as *young college boys or girls* [italics original] and as people who they *wouldn't ask about future plans* [italics original]” (Littrell & Littrell, 1982, p. 118). That said, context must be taken into consideration, and flexibility might be the operative word. For example, it is unlikely that a student counsellor would dress formally when working directly with young people in a group home or treatment centre (e.g., helping residents complete chores). On the other hand, the choice of attire may change, however, if he or she were to attend a professional meeting.

VIGNETTE

Alana greatly anticipated her first practicum at a homeless shelter. To prepare for this experience, she reviewed the agency's policy and procedures and familiarized herself with community resources. Alana was not foreign to life's hardships and personal struggles and understood the importance of counsellor-client rapport. In an effort to effectively engage this specific client population, Alana was under the false impression that she had to “dress down” so as not to alienate clients. From her perspective, clients would feel more comfortable with counsellors who emitted acceptance and understanding through their attire. Shortly into her practicum Alana's supervisor tactfully addressed her appearance, which at times appeared unkempt. During their candid conversation, Alana's belief was questioned and challenged. As a result of the conversation, Alana began to question her stereotypical and erroneous perception of homeless clientele and her role as a prospective professional.

AREA 8: POSITIVE FIRST ENCOUNTERS

The importance of first encounters requires continual emphasis. As such, students are reminded that setting the tone for counselling begins with the first telephone or in-person contact and that their language, attitude, and conduct will influence how they are perceived by clients, colleagues, and other professionals. Student trepidation often results in a sheepish and hesitant demeanour, which tends to resolve itself with experience. Although they risk sounding paternal, supervisors remind students that they are providing service in professional contexts, and therefore must conduct themselves accordingly.

VIGNETTE

Sam's interest in career counselling was instrumental in securing a practicum at the local high school. Although Sam was not much older than the students

with whom he interacted, he enjoyed learning about various assessment instruments and the overall guidance process. Despite his enthusiasm, Sam struggled to maintain a professional image. This struggle manifested itself in a variety of ways. For example, when sitting with students, he had a habit of propping his legs up on the table in front of him. There were also times when Sam diverted from the task at hand and socialized and joked with students during his sessions. To assist Sam, his supervisor offered him direct feedback that addressed the inappropriate image he was projecting and the implications associated with such deportment. Consequently, Sam was directed to modify his behaviour when interacting with students and search for a balance that would not compromise his clients' respect or his uniqueness.

CONCLUSION

Providing FNA students with a solid theoretical and practical foundation is beneficial in terms of future counselling careers or graduate studies. Such a foundation emphasizes both micro and macro counselling skills as well as the person-of-the-counsellor. Bedi and his colleagues (2005) have taken a major step in providing an invaluable blueprint toward this end. These authors have demonstrated how research can provide practical information that can be used at various levels of counsellor education. As illustrated through the preceding vignettes, with modifications this information can be adapted to educational contexts where sensitivity must be rendered to specific cultural perspectives and practices. For example, the interfacing of FNA values (e.g., caring and sharing) and professional ethical guidelines (e.g., dual relationships) requires ongoing consideration (Nigro & Uhlemann, 2004). A challenge facing many FNA counselling students involves remaining true to one's culture while attempting to integrate mainstream concepts and techniques. Bedi and his colleagues have opened the door for future research that can further expand our knowledge regarding the creation of a strong therapeutic relationship in various cultural settings.

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