

The Importance of an Indigenous Traditional Behavioral Health Approach

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June 16, 2015

Literature Review

Throughout Indian Country, the rate in which American Indian/Alaskan Native (AI/AN) people experience trauma far more outweighs the national United States rate (Tsosie, Nannauck, Buchwald, Russo, Trusz, Foy & Zatzick, 2011). The historically forced assimilation practices and policies, along with relocation that has gone unrecognized have transformed into a plethora of social and mental pathologies for Native American people today (Moghaddam, Momper, and Fong, 2013; Turner & Pope, 2009). Not only does the historical past impact the rates of trauma seen throughout the AI/AN community but the current social conditions AI/AN people face such as extreme levels of poverty, discrimination and exposure to violence are also impactful. The forced relocation of Native people has led to ethnic stratification that has caused economic strife (Turner & Pope, 2009) on and off reservations. Relocation has separated many AI/AN people from their homelands, and in turn has impaired the needed connectedness to the land for a balanced life. According to Turner and Pope relocation: "... has seemed to lead to symptoms of bereavement and traumatic stress." (2009). Historical policies that were used to assimilate Native people have a lasting effect on mental health today and counselors using Western forms of healing may reinforce traumatic experiences. It is critical that counselors understand the historical traumas American Indian and Alaska Native people endure so that they may understand the perspectives of their Native clients and their possible need for culturally appropriate care.

While there are many western methods used when working with people of trauma, AI/AN people who have mental health disorders would benefit greatly if a more

culturally appropriate approach was offered (Moghaddam et al., 2013; Tsosie, et. al; 2011; Goodkind, Toledo, John, Hall, Ross, Freeland, Coletta, Becenti-Fundark, Poola, Begay-Roanhorse, and Lee, 2010; Turner & Pope, 2009; Johnston, 2002). Joseph E. Trimble explains in the article, “The Virtues of Cultural Resonance, Competence, and Relational Collaboration with American Indian Communities: A Synthesis of the Counseling and Psychotherapy Literature” that:

The recurrent theme is that for many Indian and Native clients, interpersonal and interethnic problems can emerge when a counselor’s lack of culturally resonant experience and knowledge, deeply held stereotypes, and preconceived notions interfere with the counseling relationship and impede counseling effectiveness.” (2010).

When utilizing a more traditional approach or even offering traditional healing methods, AI/AN clients and counselors may see more progress and healing.

Traditional healing brings AI/AN people into their community and creates a space where connectedness can happen. Assimilation has long impacted Native culture. AI/AN people were prohibited from actively partaking in their religious ceremonies far into the 1970’s as well as the inability to raise their children the way they had been before colonization (Turner & Pope, 2009). Policies and laws that prohibited AI/AN people to maintain their culture debilitated identity in AI/AN communities, disrupting communal ties and becoming more individualistic (Turner & Pope, 2009).

According to Trimble, many scholars suggest counselors use a framework based on an American Indian outlook on healing instead of focusing on a Western outlook, as well as collaborating with traditional healers (2010). Trimble provides an example of

what a traditional healing system could look like: “The counselor may (a) support the viability of traditional healing as an effective treatment system, (b) actively refer clients to indigenous healers, or (c) actively work together with indigenous healers.” (2010). Offering clients more choices creates a sense of empowerment and also gives counselors more options on how to help their clients in a culturally appropriate way.

Authors Christopher J. Rybak, Carol Lakota Eastin and Irma Robbins explains that the western approach to mental health does not leave room for counselors to understand their Native clients perspectives, therefore being ineffective in terms of helping as well as limiting options for healing (2004). They explain this western approach as being “...[often] cold and soulless...” (Rybak et al., 2004). Western methodology consists of objectivity and detaching from the subject, in this case the client. Indigenous philosophy focuses more on connectedness to one another and that means connecting to the client. Linda Tuhiwai Smith explains in her book, *Decolonizing Methodologies* that: “Connecting is related to issues of identity and place, to spiritual relationships and community wellbeing.” (1999, p. 149). Therefore it is critical that the counselor connects with their client as connection promotes wellbeing.

Erica Prussing explains in her article, “Historical Trauma: Politics of a Conceptual Framework” that many scholars are expressing the need to change the dominant paradigm of mental health science (2014). Prussing writes: “Czyzewski (2011) specifies the need to look beyond conventional egocentric views of the self that dominate Euro-American psychology and psychiatry in order to understand and improve indigenous well-being.” (2014). Prussing even goes as far in her research explaining that some scholars would argue that Euro-centric models used in many counseling

organizations are functioning as cultural assimilation tactics rather than liberating American Indian/ Alaska Native people (2014). Moghaddam et. al express that Western ideologies concerning mental health that are imposed on Indigenous people is colonizing (2013).

There are many reasons to consider utilizing American Indian and Alaskan Native traditional methods for healing mental health disorders. Besides alcohol cessation success (Tsosie et. al, 2011) and other successful outcomes concerning health (Goodkind et. al, 2010), it empowers American Indian and Alaskan Native people (Moghaddam et. al, 2013). Traditional behavioral health approaches also reconnects AI/AN people to their culture and develop a sense of identity (Johnston, 2002), which can also lead to a sense of belonging. Traditional healing supports and brings awareness of self-determination, autonomy, social justice and resistance to oppression (Johnston, 2002).

Counselors and those who work with American Indian/Alaska Natives would also benefit from offering more traditional options. Joseph E. Trimble explains that when using culturally appropriate methods: "...counselors can promote client trust, rapport, and cultural empathy and improve the counselor-client relationship, both in general and with American Indian and Alaska Native clients specifically." (2010). He also goes on to explain that in order to be effectively responsive and culturally appropriate with a client, they must: "...understand the cultural contexts and unique cultural and historical characteristics of their clients." (Trimble, 2010).

Participating in traditional culture can also serve as a tool for resiliency and provide preventative care. Traditional healing such as sweats and ceremonies are ways in which Native people can take part in their culture and connect with one another. It

provides an opportunity for many to learn about their heritage. Moghaddam et al. state: "... youths who reported higher levels of cultural pride and spirituality had fewer alcohol symptoms." (2013). Counselors who work with Native youth should consider incorporating cultural alternatives for their youth clients as it may provide an opportunity for Native youth to establish their identity healthily.

Traditional behavioral healthcare provides many resources and solutions for the AI/AN community. Goodkind et. al explain that traditional healing has precedence over the prescribed behavioral health services by American Indian parents or caregivers and they claim it to be more helpful (2010). There is scholarly support stating that American Indian traditional healing methods have positive results concerning health (Goodkind, et. al, 2010). Turner and Pope argue that if counselors were culturally sensitive and incorporated Native traditional methods, the end results would be more fruitful (2009). Moghaddam et. al state that: "Therefore, not only has the role of traditional healing been proven to be an important cultural factor in the lives of AI/AN people, but it continues to impact the pervasive health behaviors that affect the community from a public health perspective as well." (2013).

Not only does a traditional behavioral health approach support a more culturally appropriate method, it is also successful in effectively treating mental health ailments for American Indian and Alaska Native people. It provides many opportunities to establish a healthy sense of belongingness in the community and a sense of self-sufficiency. While many counselors are trained to work with clients based on Western frameworks, it would be beneficial to the American Indian/Alaska Native people, the counselor and the

community, if counselor's had the opportunity to learn about Indigenous methods and collaborate with Native healers.

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