

## **Counselling across Cultures: Working with Aboriginal Clients**

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## **Counselling Across Cultures: Working with Aboriginal Clients**

Approximately 1.3 million (or 4.4 percent) of Canada's inhabitants identify themselves as Aboriginal (Statistics Canada, 2004). Due to the lack of trained Aboriginal counsellors, Aboriginal clients are often referred to Euro-Canadian counsellors for assistance. However, many Aboriginal clients do not access services available to them or terminate counselling early (Richardson & Molinaro, 1996; Peavy, 1993) due to: a) generations of interactions with non-Aboriginal people that have had tragic consequences, b) the expressed concerns of Aboriginal clients about the biases of Western psychology, and c) how counsellors try to mould behaviours that fit a Western worldview (Garrett & Herring, 2001; LaFromboise, 1988).

Because career counsellors coming from the Euro-American tradition may not be aware of how cultural and historical factors impact the counselling process when working with a marginalized population (Ridley, 1995, Sue, 2001; Sue & Sue, 1999), they need to become multiculturally competent (Arthur, Brodhead, Magnusson, & Redekopp, 2005; Arthur & McMahon, 2005). Sue, Akutsu and Higashi (1985) proposed that the major reason for cross-cultural ineffectiveness in counselling stems from how health professionals are trained. Recent research on the multicultural competence of Canadian counsellors suggested that, among counsellors in practice for ten or more years, only one-third have taken at least one course in multicultural counselling (Arthur & Januszkowski, 2001).

For Canadian career counsellors and/or counsellor educators, a dilemma in developing multicultural competence has been the lack of Canadian research. To date, most of the research on working with Aboriginal clients has come from U.S. researchers. The few available Canadian studies (Peavy 1993; Korhonen, 2002; Smith and Morrissette, 2001) supported the importance of cultural awareness and knowledge for Euro-Canadian counsellors.

What can Euro-Canadian counsellors do to provide their Aboriginal clients with career counselling that is culturally sensitive, appropriate and helpful? To answer this question, the present paper draws on two recent Canadian studies intended to expand the knowledge base concerning counselling with Aboriginal clients. Wihak (2004) explored the experience of Euro-Canadian counsellors who had lived and worked in Inuit communities for extended periods. Price (2004) sought the guidance of Aboriginal Elder counsellors concerning culturally-appropriate counselling practices. For this paper, we sought the points of intersection between the views of the Aboriginal Elder counsellors and the experience of the Euro-Canadian counsellors. Using major themes identified in Price's study, we co-constructed a cross-cultural dialogue that highlights significant findings that will be helpful for Euro-Canadian career counsellors working with Aboriginal clients.

### **Method**

Both Wihak's (2004) and Price's (2004) studies were conducted as qualitative inquiries, involving interviews with experienced counsellors. Detailed description of study methods are provided in the original documents but are omitted here in the interests of brevity.

### ***Participants***

#### *Aboriginal Elder-Counsellors*

In Aboriginal worldview, Elders are authorized by their communities to share some of their knowledge (Peat, 2002; Piquemal, 2001). This research therefore became a collaborative effort with the research participants becoming active co-researchers (Piquemal, 2001). The Elder-Counsellors in Price's (2004) study included: Spirit-Eagle, a Mohawk Elder originally from Ontario, who is a traditional healer and addictions counsellor; Bessie, an Inuit Elder and addictions counsellor who lives in Nunuvut; Sandra, a Métis Elder from Alberta who specializes in working with children; White Thunderbird Woman, a Cree Elder with Métis status who is a

traditional healer and has a Master's in Social Work; and Peggy, a Cree professor originally from a small community in Manitoba.

#### *Euro-Canadian counselors*

Participants were selected through a process of purposeful sampling (Patton, 1990) from an existing professional network. Selection criteria were: (1) lived in Nunavut for a minimum of two years with professional employment that involved educational and career counselling work with Inuit; (2) were born and raised in Canada, of Euro-Canadian origin; (3) used English as their working language, (4) had returned to southern Canada a minimum of one year and a maximum of ten years before the interview.

### ***Research Interviews***

#### *Price study*

A culturally appropriate style of interviewing was used for data collection (Brayboy & Deyhle, 2000; Hammersley & Atkinson, 1996). Rather than asking specific interview questions, data was collected through conversations around several topics of interest.

#### *Wihak study*

Each participant was asked to speak about her own experience of living and working in Nunavut, within the general frame of assisting in the development of effective methods for training multicultural counsellors. Verbatim transcripts of tape-recorded sessions approved by participants were used for analysis.

### ***Data Analysis***

Price's (2004) data analysis involved examination of the Elder-Counsellors' interview transcripts and co-construction of personalized narratives for each. The data was synthesized across all of the Elder-Counsellors' interview transcripts and narratives to generate five overarching themes about the counselling environment, relationship and interventions. For this paper, we extended the analysis by relating findings from Wihak's (2004) analysis of interviews with Euro-Canadian counsellors to Price's themes. The findings presented below represent the commonalities found through this secondary analysis.

## **Findings**

### ***Theme 1: Develop Self-Understanding***

The Elder-Counsellors noted that knowing oneself is a key first step to becoming a better human being and a helpful counsellor. Their suggestions included understanding White privilege and finding a personal spiritual connection.

#### *Understanding White privilege*

Elder-Counsellor Peggy spoke about White privilege and the belief that counselling is a culture-free endeavour: "To think something is culture-free is a thought that would come from somebody who thinks they don't need to know the culture." She added that "if they are White, they've got privilege...without them doing anything, they've got it. And White privilege has just an overwhelming impact in counselling." Peggy's concern for this issue was echoed by Euro-Canadian counsellor Michelle: "There's just the privilege of my life ... just being aware of the fact that I have a different experience because I'm White.... And I think learning about the privilege and knowing that reality certainly...made a difference for me."

*Finding a personal spiritual connection*

Some of the Elder-Counsellors spoke to the importance of being spiritually connected as this is fundamental to Aboriginal worldview. Spirit Eagle noted that: “If I don’t have my own spiritual connection, whatever the shape of that may be, I’m going to be coming from human cleverness. I don’t have the grounding.” The Euro-Canadian counsellors also found spirituality to be important. As participant Fluff remarked, “People have often said these words, ‘Inuit are spiritual people,’ and that sounds...like a cliché, but when I’m with people who have...a spiritual connection to the Land...it is spiritual.”

***Theme 2: Understand Aboriginal Realities***

Counsellors must have a wide-ranging knowledge of Aboriginal history, as described by Aboriginal writers, have developed familiarity with cultural traditions, both past and present, have an appreciation of Aboriginal collectivistic worldview and be able to integrate “other ways of knowing” into their counselling repertoire to increase cultural empathy and understanding.

*Impact of the past.* All the Elder-Counsellors emphasized how the past has impacted the trust available to Aboriginal individuals when they interact with Euro-Canadians. Sandra stated that “The history that Canadians get is that all these great White explorers discovered this land. Well, if those great White explorers didn’t have great Native guides and great Native women who provided for them, they would never have survived.” Euro-Canadian counsellor Debbie frankly acknowledged the tendency of people in her culture to feel superior to Aboriginal people: “We tend to look at other cultures...as maybe one down from us....There’s just no question about that in Canada when it comes to working with the Aboriginal community.”

### *Aboriginal worldview and culture*

Appreciating Aboriginal worldview and culture is a precursor to developing therapeutic relationships with Aboriginal clients. Elder-Counsellor Peggy spoke about understanding “relationality—how everything is related, how everything is connected. It’s not an individualistic worldview. It’s very collective and very connected to one’s surroundings and to the environment.” Euro-Canadian counsellor Debbie gave an example of how a problem might be approached differently from the two worldviews: “You’re having problems, with your husband, so leave him! That’s the obvious solution to people who think in a linear way. The consequences are quite clear.” In contrast, “In a circular way...you come to understand that’s only half of the issue, that it’s not quite so clear cut. It isn’t a matter of just simply...eliminating things; it’s a matter of including things.”

### *Non-interference*

Understanding the ethic of non-interference, the belief that it is not right to tell another what to do, is also integral to comprehending Aboriginal worldview. Elder-Counsellor Sandra explained: “There are so many people who feel they are not prejudiced and that they are not condescending or not feeling superior but in fact their attitude towards how Aboriginal people do things, such as child rearing, shows that they are—whether they know it or not.” Euro-Canadian counsellor Danya expressed a similar concern: “How do you help them make changes?...How do we know what’s best for a different group of people?”

### *Aboriginal ways of knowing*

Aboriginal ways of knowing and understanding the world may influence voice modulation and pacing, both in terms of the client’s way of speaking and in how the counsellor responds to the client. Elder-Counsellor Bessie explained: “Give them time to speak, and if they

don't answer right away, don't ask for it." Similarly, Euro-Canadian counsellor Fluff observed: "In the North, there is a very respectful way of listening and speaking, and when a person is speaking, they would not look at you....And when you listen, you say 'Eeeeeee' and you nod, and the...tone of your voice and the way you say that conveys such compassion and understanding and interest."

### ***Theme 3: Be Flexible in Structuring Counselling***

The Elder-Counsellors spoke to the importance of counsellor flexibility, including where sessions are held and the time set aside for sessions.

Spirit Eagle suggested that, if possible, taking clients out of the office can be very beneficial to providing a healing environment: "Walk on a beach, walk along the river, walk in the forest. If you're in a city, go walk in a park...somewhere where you can touch the earth...." Euro-Canadian counsellor Pat made a similar point when she described how she actually started going out camping on the weekends to see clients. "Really, just in conversations...I actually got to catch up with a lot of people."

Euro-Canadian counsellors need an understanding of Aboriginal time orientation (living in the present) and a *being* rather than a *doing* or action orientation. Elder-Counsellor Peggy noted that if she sees someone occasionally she tries to finish "when it feels appropriate to finish—maybe ten minutes or it may take three or four hours." Similarly, Fluff, a Euro-Canadian counsellor noted, "A person might want to tell a story, and the story might not be able to be told in fifty minutes."

#### ***Theme 4: Build Connections with Clients***

Euro-Canadian counsellors must be especially mindful about the way they enter into *relationship* with Aboriginal clients. The Elder-Counsellors discussed using self-disclosure and a non-directive counselling style.

##### *Self-disclosure*

Elder-Counsellor Peggy explained that “an appropriate amount of self-disclosure is important, as is trying to make some kind of relational connections. You can’t expect clients to talk to you about important things until they can trust you. And part of that trust is knowing who you are.” Euro-Canadian counsellor Rebecca agreed with this, saying “It’s okay to give a bit of information back so they feel that reciprocity.”

##### *Non-directive*

The five Elder-Counsellors all agreed that, given the history of colonization, it was important to use an egalitarian, non-directive counselling approach with Aboriginal clients. White Thunderbird Woman said that at times Aboriginal clients do “want you to give them the answers, just like anybody else does...but by doing that, you’re doing them a great disservice because it perpetuates the whole fostering dependency on someone else.” Euro-Canadian counsellor Soshana described her approach to this issue in work with community groups on developing mental health programs: “Given the appropriate knowledge, they can solve most of their own psychological problems and issues.” Her strategy was to ask the different community groups what they wanted. “They kept saying, ‘You tell us’.” Soshana would say, “You tell me. ‘No, you tell us.’ ‘No, you tell me. And this went on for a year.”

### *Theme 5: Use Holistic, Culturally Appropriate Approaches*

The Elder-Counsellors stressed that working holistically with Aboriginal clients fits well with a worldview that emphasizes connectedness. Techniques that may be effective include storytelling and metaphor, understanding Aboriginal humour, and allowing clients to express their anger.

#### *Aboriginal humour*

The Elder-Counsellors wanted Euro-Canadian counsellors to be careful in their use of humour so it is not misunderstood or the timing is off. Sandra explained that “Aboriginal humour is fun humour, it’s self deprecating.” But she cautioned Euro-Canadian counsellors to be very careful or “it could come across as being racist”. Euro-Canadian counsellor Soshana described her experience of Inuit humour. At a dance, the heavy sequined skirt she was wearing suddenly fell around her ankles. “I ended up hiding behind the coat rack... I remember these Elders...peering through the coats saying, “We know you want to have babies but can’t you keep your panties on?”...So then my nickname was *Nuloak Nulok*, which means someone who likes to stick her butt out for everyone to see.”

#### *Venting anger*

All the Elder-Counsellors agreed that allowing clients to vent their anger is an important part of counselling, especially when the counsellor is from the dominant culture. However, the counsellor needs to ensure that the anger doesn’t get out of control. White Thunderbird Woman raised the issue that anger “is a coping mechanism, it isn’t always bad” but that clients need to move beyond blaming others. Euro-Canadian counsellor Danya recounted how in an Aboriginal women’s healing group, one member would get angry. Danya accepted what she was saying but then she would ask the rest of the group for feedback to help her sort out what was an attack on

the therapist and what was legitimate. “It turned out a lot...were not really things that anybody else in the Inuit community was feeling.”

### **Conclusion**

When we compared the findings of the Wihak (2004) and Price (2004) studies, we found a high degree of concordance between Elder-Counsellors’ advice about working with Aboriginal clients and the insights of Euro-Canadian counsellors gained from experience. While some of their suggestions are good generic counselling skills and approaches (Korhonen, 2002), other suggestions involve the counsellor developing a culture-specific understanding of the client’s world.

Career counsellors need to be aware of White privilege and spirituality in their own lives. They must understand how Aboriginal history, worldview and culture will impact employment and career attitudes, as well as the counselling process. They have to structure counselling sessions to suit Aboriginal understanding of time and build connections with clients by using self-disclosure and a non-directive approach. They need to understand both humour and anger in the Aboriginal context.

More than academic study is necessary to gain the knowledge and skills needed to be an effective cross-cultural career counsellor. Both the Elder-Counsellors and the Euro-Canadian counsellors stressed the need for counsellors to become immersed in Aboriginal communities through participation in community life rather than restricting themselves to professional roles.

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