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The Value System of the Native American Counseling Client: An Exploration

LOUISE WASINGER

INTRODUCTION

Storytelling is a valued characteristic of some nations in the Native American population. Storytelling is often used to convey important information and major points to be learned. Some significant American Indian values that can be of assistance to counselors and therapists in the counseling process are shared in this culturally appropriate format. Following is a discussion of the importance of such values when correctly incorporated in counseling techniques.

It is essential that counselors be aware of some background, history, and specific issues confronting clients from various ethnic groups who seek psychotherapy. Inherent in that awareness should be a knowledge of the value systems of these clients. This is especially true regarding the values of the American Indian, which differ greatly from and directly conflict with those of the dominant Euro-American culture. It is possible that this conflict could transfer to the therapeutic setting between an American Indian client and a non-Indian counselor. Acquisition of knowledge and understanding regarding the Native American's value system can help the counselor minimize such conflict.

The purpose of this paper is to present several significant values of Native Americans that may greatly facilitate the thera-

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peutic process with an Indian client. This information is communicated in the form of a story, mimicking the storytelling of American Indian culture. George Howard pinpoints the importance of the storytelling tradition in imparting cultural values when he states that “the young learn to tell the dominant stories of their cultural group—be those stories scientific, civic, moral, mathematical, religious, historical, racial, or political in nature.”¹ Tappan and Brown reinforce the importance of this tradition, citing the development of moral reasoning skills.² Through the verbal retelling of one’s own experiences, one internalizes the meaning of the story. This act entails acknowledgment and expression of one’s moral perspective, honoring what one feels and thinks, and ultimately claiming responsibility for one’s actions;³ the latter being a true mark of maturation.

The particular values referenced throughout the story are listed in chart 1. The number to the left of the value in the chart corresponds to the endnote numbers throughout the story, beginning with number 7 (see chart 1, List of Selected Native American Indian Value Concepts). Each value cited is unique to Native American culture and reflects the most significant differences between the Euro-American and the Native American cultures. However, this author cautions against stereotyping regarding these differences. One must keep in mind the immense diversity among American Indian tribes in worldview, traditional ceremonial practices, religious beliefs, language, eating habits, and clothing habits.⁴ The story contains several common traits found in Indian culture; it is not this author’s intent to combine all 505 federally recognized and 365 state-recognized tribal entities⁵ into one Indian stereotype.

The storyline is based on the migratory process of urban Native American males and its accompanying issues. This dramatization depicts the potential obstacles that an urban Indian male, Henry, faces in his attempt to migrate from the reservation to the city. His story may be typical of the numerous conflicts faced by this group in their attempt to acculturate.

HENRY

Arriving in the city from the reservation—or “res,” as they called it at home⁶—Henry acted on Uncle John’s advice to contact the Indian Center immediately upon arrival. His uncle had said they

would help him find a job, in addition to “putting a roof over his head.” When he arrived there, he was sorely disappointed to learn from a woman named Margaret that they would not be able to provide housing. This service had been discontinued due to budget cuts by the California State Department of Education, a primary resource for financial support. However, the center’s job training and referral service offered classes for men who needed vocational skills in order to enter the “white world.” Henry now wished he had finished his senior year of high school. None of his friends had either. But it was now evident that, to enter the “white world,” he would have to play by their rules. Finding a job without his diploma or without taking the General Education Equivalency exam was not very likely—or so said “Margaret the Apple.” He would have to take the General Education Equivalency exam even before they would allow him to enroll in the welding classes that were offered at the center.⁷

“All this paperwork—what a waste,” Henry thought, finishing up the necessary task. He had hardly been able to focus. The phones had been ringing continuously since he had arrived.

A little boy brushed by, heading for the water fountain next to him. Boy, was he thirsty. The water hesitated and then gurgled out of the spout. At home on the res, the stream was so peaceful when Henry and Benjamin took the horses in the morning. Nessie’s breathing was long and heavy due to the tough ride. The water gurgled over the pebbles⁸

“Henry, Henry, hey Henry, you’re done.” Margaret’s voice had been a rude disruption from his daydream, but Henry was ecstatic to be out of there. The phone was still ringing as he headed for the door. Stepping outside, he noticed the sun beginning to set in the west. Nightfall was upon the city. Henry was pleased at summer’s onset, meaning daylight was extended. He thought back to the res, where the arrival of summer meant that now little brother Benjamin would begin shearing the sheep and counting the lambs, in addition to planting for harvest. Time was passing.⁹

Since Henry had left for the city, it was now necessary for Benjamin to take on what had previously been Henry’s chores. Henry had wanted to stay and take care of the family, but Uncle John said no, he must go.¹⁰ It was what was best for the family.¹¹ That was of utmost importance. Even before Henry’s father deserted them, Mama’s brother John had made the decisions for Henry and his sisters.¹² Therefore, without thought of arguing with his elder, Henry cooperated. It was “the way.”

But now that he was here in the city, Henry felt extremely isolated and lonely. The experience of being away from the family and the res for the first time was not something he had dwelt on before leaving. At the center, Margaret had given him a list of some counselors, in case he needed to talk to someone during his stay. No, Henry decided, that definitely was not for him. What could possibly come out of talking to a stranger, especially about personal problems? That's what family was for.

One did not go outside the group for help.¹³ Besides, family would be displeased if they discovered that he had not called Uncle John or Uncle Pete for assistance. Turning to a stranger to talk about problems was not done. Personal and family problems were kept to oneself.¹⁴ If Henry needed to talk to anyone, he would talk to family.

Unfortunately, no one from the res could help him find a place to stay here in the city. Checking his wallet, he counted seventy-five dollars. That was all that was left of what he had brought from home. Maybe he should have given that beggar at the bus station one dollar instead of five.¹⁵ Right now, Henry needed it as much as the beggar did. He had realized since arriving that his money would not go very far.

Maybe that was why the woman on the bus had responded with disbelief when he had told her that was all he had brought to the city. This white woman obviously had never visited an Indian reservation. What need does one have to put away money on the res?¹⁶ In addition, regardless of her accusation to the contrary, Henry *had* been listening to her small talk; even though he found it unnecessary and annoying.¹⁷ She was too ignorant to realize he was looking away as a sign of respect,¹⁸ not inattention, as she had accused him.¹⁹ Once, during the course of the bus trip, Henry had attempted to convey his irritation at her continual interruptions. Nonetheless, in her ignorance, she remained oblivious to his expression of anger, retorting, "Why are you staring at me?"²⁰

Turning to the matter at hand, Henry began the walk to the bus stop. He took out the list of apartments that Margaret had given him. She had turned out to be helpful after all. Still, she was an "apple," red on the outside and white on the inside.²¹ This became obvious when, waiting for the bus, Henry saw her leave the center in a Mercedes. She definitely was not one of "us," he thought.²²

Henry boarded the bus and glanced out the window. The bus whizzed by the fluorescent signs on the buildings: "Diet Center,"

"Health Spa," "Hair Salon." These types of stores were abundant in the city. It seemed to him that whites were constantly trying to change or improve. It was as if they could not accept themselves, always unhappy with who they were. Why couldn't they just "be"?²³

The driver yelled Henry's stop, and he paused at the top of the stairs, attempting to make out the small, white numbers on the building.

"Hi-ho, Tonto! What'd ya do with Silver today?" joked the bus driver.

No, better not, Henry decided. If he turned around and looked at him, the driver would see the tear. And he was a bus driver. What did it matter?! Uncle John had told him to stay out of trouble. It wasn't worth it. Henry descended the stairs of the bus. As he stepped onto the sidewalk, a crumpled McDonald's bag flew out the bus window. It landed at Henry's feet. As he turned and walked toward the apartment, Henry thought of the res. It would be a long stay in the city.

CHART 1

List of Selected Native American Value Concepts

- (6) Educational goals
- (7) Auditory attunement
- (8) Time perspective
- (9) Reverence of elders
- (10) Cooperation
- (11) Matriarchal emphasis
- (12) Group cohesion
- (13) Privacy
- (14) Value of sharing
- (15) Indifference to savings
- (16) Value of silence/futility of small talk
- (17) Use of nonverbal behavior
- (18) Use of nonverbal behavior
- (19) Value of placidity
- (21) Indifference to ownership
- (22) Concept of "being"

CONCLUSION

Information regarding the value systems of American Indians can serve two purposes: First, it can dispel possible stereotypes. Second, it may help today's counselors and therapists to work more effectively with American Indian clients.

Information alone however, is not enough. Successful application of this knowledge is necessary for future counselors in their attempts to provide culturally sensitive services to this population. The first step may involve examining potential "trouble spots" where the value system of the Native American client may come in conflict with that of the non-Indian counselor. Following are examples of possible value clashes.

One Native American value that may cause difficulties is "group cohesion." The goal of psychotherapy is the emotional healing of the individual. Within Indian culture, however, the needs of the group are placed above those of any individual. "They (counselors) urge him to think of himself, to consider his own feelings, both of which are counter to his Native American values which stress the importance of advice from, and respect for one's elders, and the importance of the group over the individual."²⁴ Counselors must be aware of and prepared to deal with opposing treatment goals and expectations. Attempting to force Native American clients to accept the non-Indian concept of individualism may bring therapy to an abrupt end. Counselors should be aware of the Native American client's identification with this value and should not interpret it as resistance.

Another conflicting value that may have implications in the therapeutic setting is privacy. Among American Indians, interference in another's affairs is discouraged. Therefore, an Indian client may resent and subsequently resist an outsider's attempt to help with a personal problem. Counselors would do well to expect and prepare for mismatched expectations between themselves and Native American clients. It would be in the best interests of the therapeutic relationship to proceed slowly and cautiously.

The American Indian value of silence and the practice of remaining quiet, which are opposites of the action-oriented dominant white culture, may create friction during the counseling session. Native American clients may be misjudged by non-Indian counselors as inattentive, slow, or even lazy. This misperception may hinder the development of trust, so essential to the counseling process. Counselors who understand and utilize silence will increase their clients' sense of being heard.

On a related note, the emphasis on nonverbal behavior in American Indian culture runs contrary to the non-Indian's verbally oriented communication style. For example, American Indians may avoid direct eye contact in certain circumstances, leading non-Indian counselors to perceive them falsely as uninterested or introverted. The course of treatment may be adversely affected by these incorrect assumptions and impressions.

The futility of small talk as viewed within Indian culture may also disrupt the establishment of the therapeutic relationship. "Because the history of American Indian identity is maintained through oral tradition, an individual is likely to define words as powerful and value-laden. The tendency to use words casually, as in small talk, or frivolously, as in anger, might be avoided at any cost. The fact that the main entry into the counseling or therapeutic setting is with words increases the potential for a problematic situation."²⁵ Given this value, non-Indian counselors may want to minimize small talk.

Finally, the concept of *being* may cause problems in the therapeutic setting between a Native American client and a non-Indian counselor. Native Americans believe "they do not have to wait to be; they are right now. And so it is through life; one is what one is; one is continually in a state of being rather than becoming."²⁶ Euro-American counselors, who come from a culture where "man is perpetually in a state of becoming,"²⁷ must recognize this difference and align therapeutic goals and tasks with the Native American client's values.

In summation, the above discussion highlights potential clashes in the therapeutic setting between a Native American client and a non-Indian counselor. Overall, non-Indian counselors should not assume that the client is manifesting resistance to the process of therapy. Instead, this apparent resistance may be a direct result of the value differentials. The American Indian lives as a cultural being within the content of his or her culture. Awareness and understanding on the part of the non-Indian counselor are essential for the foundation of an effective therapeutic relationship.

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