

North America's Native Peoples: A Social Justice and Trauma Counseling Approach

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This article understands North America's indigenous peoples in the context of social justice. The authors discuss the role of legislation in shaping cultural contexts of indigenous people and influencing mental health issues in Native American communities. Trauma counseling with Native Americans is explored.

Este artículo entiende a los habitantes indígenas de Norteamérica en el contexto de la justicia social. Los autores discuten el papel que juega la legislación en la formación de los contextos culturales de los pueblos indígenas y la influencia que ejerce en los problemas de salud mental en las comunidades de Americanos Nativos. Se explora la terapia de trauma con Americanos Nativos.

In this article, we explore counseling with North America's indigenous peoples in the context of social justice. *Social justice* is defined as a societal state in which all members of a society have the same basic rights, security, opportunities, obligations, and social benefits (Department of Welfare, Republic of South Africa, 1997). Among North America's indigenous peoples (hereinafter referred to as Native Americans), social justice has been an illusory concept because, time after time, their status as full human beings has not been recognized nor have they been granted full rights as national citizens. A lack of social justice has been at the center of Native American-European American relationships since expansionism and domination of the Native American began with the first war waged against the Pequot tribe in 1637. In this war, women and children were fatally burned in retaliation over trade disagreements (Cave, 1996).

Within the context of social justice, we examine cultural differences in an attempt to help understand the counseling needs of Native Americans. The social justice contexts are (a) the role of legislation in shaping the cultural context of Native Americans, (b) the context of mental health challenges among Native Americans, and (c) counseling with Native Americans in their cultural context. We write this article in hope that the issues raised will help mental health workers continue to provide more effective counseling services for Native American people.

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the role of legislation in shaping the cultural context of native americans

In the United States, Native Americans constitute 561 federally recognized tribes and approximately 325 state recognized and unrecognized tribes that are currently applying for federal recognition (U.S. Department of the Interior, Office of the Assistant Secretary–Indian Affairs, Office of Federal Acknowledgment, 2007). In Canada, Native Americans constitute approximately 615 federally recognized First Nations bands in addition to the Inuits, who live in Arctic Canada, and the Métis, who are people of European and Native American mixed heritage with their own treaty rights (Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, 2009a, 2009b, 2009c). In addition, in both Canada and the United States, many people are not officially affiliated with Native American communities but have a Native American heritage that significantly influences their lives. The legislative history of the two countries is somewhat different; however, in both countries, legislation has supported maltreatment of the indigenous people.

Native Americans and mixed-heritage Natives are the only racial/ethnic groups whose identities have been legislated by their governments (for further discussion of the legal status of Native American tribes and their members, see Weatherhead, 1980). To participate in the benefits of tribal treaties (such as land usage, education benefits, health benefits, and proceeds from tribal casinos), these groups must meet specific criteria (Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, 1999; U.S. Department of the Interior, 2006). Examples of these criteria are proving blood quantum ratios (e.g., 25% of one's "blood" must be from a Native American ancestor) and having parents who were enrolled in "Indian tribes" (in the United States) or registered as "status Indians" (in Canada). In the United States, to receive tribal protection rights, such as protection through Native American courts concerning child welfare, individuals must live on reservations or in tribal communities and must practice indigenous religions or engage in recognized Native American cultural practices (Indian Child Welfare Act of 1978). In Canada, to receive general community-based services, individuals must live on rather than off their reservation lands (Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, 1999).

Historically, Native Americans have been subjected to treaties that defined relations between them and European governments (and later the U.S. and Canadian governments). These treaties were typically forced, and Native Americans continued to lose the power to defend themselves against what they considered European American aggressors. In the 1700s, these treaties provided for separating European settlers from Native Americans by removing them from traditional lands to be relocated to reservations. These reservation lands at times resembled prisoner of war camps. Starvation and diseases, such as smallpox and tuberculosis, were rampant (Cohen, 1953).

In the 1860s, U.S. and Canadian policies regarding Native Americans changed to assimilationism. These policies drove the legislative and social decisions regarding Native Americans for at least the next 150 years, causing tremendous anxiety and despair among the indigenous people who struggled to keep their ancient cultures and traditions alive (Cohen, 1953).

Using Social Darwinism to undergird policy toward Native Americans in the 1800s, governments and religious organizations turned to boarding schools to further civilize Native Americans. By the early 1900s, 80% of all Native American children across the United States were being removed, often forcibly from their family homes, to attend boarding schools (R. Fields, personal communication, May 20, 1996; Tafoya & Del Vecchio, 2005). In these schools, school administrators and teachers cut children's hair against Native American spiritual traditions, forced the children to dress in European American clothing, changed their names to American Christian names, forced them to speak English instead of their native languages, suppressed their cultural practices, and subjected them to harsh, demeaning, and often cruel discipline (Kleinfeld & Bloom, 1977). Children in the boarding schools were instructed in European American domestic arts, manual labor, and agricultural skills, instead of the skills of their ancestors (R. Fields, personal communication, May 20, 1996; Tafoya & Del Vecchio, 2005). As a result of this boarding school era, the majority of the Native American languages and a great deal of Native American culture were lost. For many Native American children, the boarding school experience led to confusion, cultural and self-alienation, homesickness, and resentment. Boarding schools were prolific until the 1940s, although some existed through the 1970s, when the majority were closed or turned over to the tribes to run (Adams, 1995).

In the late 1800s, both the United States and Canada continued their policies of assimilation toward Native Americans through land allotment and distribution laws. The U.S. congress passed the Dawes Act (1887), also known as the General Allotment Act. More than two thirds of Native American lands were lost during the general allotment (Case & Voluck, 2002; McDonnell, 1991). Native Americans received allotments of 40 to 160 acres. The rest of the reservation land (more than 60 million acres) was opened to European American settlement with proceeds from these sales going to the U.S. government (McDonnell, 1991). The purpose of the Dawes Act was purportedly to protect Indian property rights; however, legislators reasoned that assimilation would promote civility:

Senator Henry L. Dawes, the act's author, . . . stated that allotment would be a key step in changing Amerindian lifestyles, saying that post-allotment, civilized native Americans would "wear civilized clothes . . . cultivate the ground, live in houses, ride in Studebaker wagons, send children to school, drink whiskey [and] own property." (Sturgis, 2003, p. 95)

In Canada, the Gradual Civilization Act (1857), the Constitution Act (1867; formerly called the British North America Act), and the Indian Act (1876) were also designed to civilize Native Americans, but to do so by teaching them

European Canadian ways while keeping them on reservations. Thus, land was distributed to Native American men who could read, write, and speak English; reservations were otherwise kept intact. In addition, the Indian Act of 1876 caused Native American women who married Caucasian men to lose their Indian status, and the British North America Act of 1867 brought “Indians, and Lands reserved for the Indians” (Constitutional Act, § 6, ¶ 91) under the direct control of the Canadian government.

The allotment acts of the United States and Canada proved disastrous for Native American tribes and changed their lifeways permanently. Under the allotment acts of Canada, the Canadian Parliament quickly passed a system of laws that replaced politically powerful Aboriginal governments with politically weak bands of councils. The Canadian government took control of Native Americans’ financial reserves and outlawed their traditional marriage and parenting practices. In both the United States and Canada, Native American religions were outlawed. Traditional matricentral practices (in which women had owned houses and were responsible for agriculture, and in which men were responsible for hunting and fishing) were replaced with European patriarchal practices. Hunting lands were closed, men were forced into the fields, and women were domesticated, becoming economically and emotionally dependent on their husbands. Men were declared “head of household” for the purposes of property rights, and women lost their coequal social and political status with men. Thus, European American values congruent with religious ideals, nuclear families, individual wealth accumulation, and individual land ownership were imposed on Native American society. Native American identity was weakened and their communal life was compromised (Portman & Garrett, 2005).

Under the Dawes Commission, which implemented the Dawes Act of 1887, corruption marred the distribution of land (Debo, 1940). Because many Native Americans who lived on reservations could not prove their Native American ancestry by producing the required documents, they were de-enrolled from their tribes and removed from their reservations without any compensation. An example of the influence of the Dawes Act can be viewed in an examination of the tribal census roles and official lists of those who were removed from these roles from the Five Civilized Tribes of Oklahoma. A large percentage of the members of these tribes were removed from the census roles, thus effectively excluding them and their descendants from any recognition or treaty benefits associated with Native American status (Garrouette, 2003). At the same time, European and other Americans who had had no previous connection to the tribes were added to the tribal census roles with the result that these Americans also received full distributions of Native American lands and treaty payments (Carter, 1999).

For those Native Americans who did receive land distributions, few attained the economic self-sufficiency envisioned by humanitarian groups such as the Indian Rights Association, the Indian Protection Committee, and Friends of

the Indians. Desperate Native Americans sold their land allotments to buy food and provisions. Greedy speculators and politicians swindled unsuspecting Native Americans out of their property. Within 20 years, much allotment property was lost. For example, by the early 1920s, 80% of all Native American lands in Oklahoma (which had previously been Indian Territory and totally owned by Native Americans) were in European American hands (Debo, 1984). In both the United States and Canada, previous and subsequent to the allotment acts, Native Americans had been and did remain the most economically deprived, worst educated, and least physically healthy of any American ethnic group (Levinson, 1998).

In 1926, growing national concerns emerged about the plight of Native Americans. Although U.S. Native Americans had been offered citizenship in 1924, *The Problem of Indian Administration* (Institute for Government Research, 1928), commissioned by the U.S. Secretary of the Interior and known as the Meriam Report, documented that assimilation in general had been a dismal failure. According to the Meriam Report, the destruction of the Indian way of life had not been successfully replaced by European American culture or values. The Meriam Report stated that “an overwhelming majority of the Indians are poor, even extremely poor, and they are not adjusted to the economic and social system of the dominant white civilization” (Institute for Government Research, 1928, p. 3). Effective, immediate action needed to be taken to reverse the terrible circumstances of the Native American peoples.

Thus, the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934 was passed. The act stopped the sale of allotments, provided funding mechanisms for tribal economic development, sought to decrease enrollments in boarding schools, and sought to strengthen tribal governments and assist Native American tribes in regaining their cultures and religions. However, implementation of the act was poorly managed, and the benefits of the act were short lived. The Bureau of Indian Affairs, which is charged with carrying out treaties, policies, and laws regarding Native Americans (Henson, 1996), still maintained custodial rights over Native American funds, and Native American people still experienced racism and discrimination in ways that kept them economically oppressed. Opponents of the act, principally people who were more politically and conservatively religious, resented the new toleration of Native American religions. They stated that the Indian Reorganization Act promoted “degrading tribalism” (Debo, 1984, p. 340) and even promoted Communism.

Subsequent to the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934, the U.S. government again reversed its stance toward Native American assimilation and began to look for ways to end the trustee relationship it had with certain tribes. Consequently, House Concurrent Resolution 108 (1953) was implemented to terminate tribal governments and tribal status for more than 100 tribes and more than 10,000 Native American people. In conjunction with the resolution, a relocation program was instituted, which strongly encouraged Native

Americans from many tribes to move off reservations and into areas that were more economically viable (Fixico, 1986). Thus, from 1952 to 1962, a mass migration of Native Americans from reservations to designated cities around the nation (e.g., Chicago, Cleveland, Dallas, Denver, Los Angeles, Oklahoma City, Tulsa, St. Louis, San Francisco) took place, coupled with a quick and continuous reduction in tribal rights and tribal government. No legislative parallel to the Indian Reorganization Act occurred in Canada. However, the Canadian government implemented various relocation policies that led to the urbanization of many Native Americans in Canada (e.g., Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, Canada, 1969).

Today, almost half of all Native Americans live in metropolitan areas, have received public education in English-speaking schools, and have been exposed to urban life (Nagel, 1995). In these cities, Native Americans typically live in ethnically stratified, inner-city neighborhoods characterized by high concentrations of poverty (greater than 40%) and rates of crime, teenage pregnancy, and dropping out of school that are at least 34% greater than the national mean (National Research Council, Commission on Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education, Panel on High-Risk Youth, 1993). Native Americans living in these poverty-stricken areas often have minimal education and poor employment prospects. In Canada, the loss of livelihood associated with federal relocations have severely hampered Native American's abilities to be economically self-sufficient, and the relocation process itself has seemed to lead to symptoms of bereavement and traumatic stress (Dussault et al., 1996).

Beginning in the 1970s, some federal policies were put in place that strengthened tribal governments and self-sufficiency. Today, a growing number of tribally owned businesses exist, such as gaming parlors, tobacco shops, convenience stores, and oil and gas companies that are bringing much-needed capital into U.S. Native American tribes and nations. These business entities provide some local employment opportunities, although many reservations and their Native American inhabitants are still desperately poor. However, legislative changes have not necessarily changed society's attitudes about the place of Native Americans in the social structure. Both Native Americans and Canadian Aborigines are still classified as dependents of their respective federal governments; thus, Native Americans are still the only citizens of the United States and Canada who do not have full constitutional rights (Canby, 1998).

Examples of these abridged rights are the U.S. government's control over Native American lands and property and the Canadian government's support of companies who use tribal lands illegally for personal or corporate profit. In the United States, Native Americans are not allowed to set rents, freely sell or buy their property, or freely devise their property to their heirs if the property is designated as trust lands by the federal government (McCulley, 2005). Moreover, some trust land is held as sacred (i.e., to be used for religious

and ceremonial functions only; Native American Sacred Lands Act, 2003). Yet various corporate and governmental agencies have been allowed by the government to use trust lands for such purposes as research, nuclear waste dumps, mining, and public recreation, thus curtailing Native Americans' religious freedoms as well (Corbin, 2004). In Canada, government-supported companies encroach on Native American-owned lands to mine minerals or cut lumber. The most recent example has been the governmental licensing of corporations to extract resources and develop building projects on Lubicon Cree lands. The encroachment on these lands has been so egregious that, in 1990 and renewed in 2006, the United Nations Human Rights Commission condemned the Canadian government for violating the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, stating that its actions "endangered the way of life and the culture of the Lubicon Cree" (Yunkaporta, 2007, ¶ 4).

This review of the role of legislation in shaping the cultural context of Native American people highlights the institutionalization of discriminatory policies on the basis of colonial doctrines of expansionism and the conquering and/or assimilation of North America's original inhabitants. Unfortunately, this philosophy still undergirds decisions made about relationships between Native American people and their respective federal governments.

the context of mental health challenges among native americans

Some scholars believe that the lack of social justice toward generations of Native Americans has led to widely experienced transgenerational trauma. This trauma, in turn, is associated with other mental health concerns that are prevalent among Native Americans, such as posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), alcoholism, and depression (Evans-Campbell, 2008; Trujillo, 2000). Chemical abuse, including alcohol abuse, seems to be a major coping mechanism among Native American people. Indeed, although some evidence exists that Native American people have a genetic predisposition for alcoholism, trauma induced by stereotyping, racism, and acculturation pressures may increase the likelihood that alcoholism will continue to be a pervasive problem in Native American communities (Davis, 2007; Robin, Chester, & Goldman, 1996).

Trauma-based disorders can be further exacerbated by challenges with racial identity development. Theory and research have suggested that people often seek refuge in the safety of the socially assigned racial group to which they belong in response to trauma and oppression (Sue & Sue, 2007). However, Native Americans' identification with their racial group, and the resulting comfort and safety that could be offered by immersion into that group, can be problematic (Trimble, 2000). This is because racial identity development can be affected by internalization of the stereotyping and racism (Sue & Sue, 2007) that are ingrained in the social fabric of the United States and Canada

and perpetuated through a system of unequal power relationships in public and private institutions.

Thus, for Native Americans, identifying with their own race can be substantially hindered by (a) the loss of culture, languages, and values through generations of children who were raised in boarding schools; (b) ambivalence concerning the identification with a race that has been characterized as untrustworthy, indolent, and worthless (Oswalt, 2002); and (c) being members of a racial group with a transgenerational history of alcoholism, poverty, and violence, and living a less privileged life than that of their European American contemporaries. Additionally, open hatred toward Native Americans, heard in expressions such as “the only good Indian is a dead Indian” (popularized in the 1880s but still heard today; Mieder, Kingsbury, & Harder, 2000), is a stark warning for those who embrace their Native American heritage. Thus, the psychological protective functioning that could be afforded by a strong racial identity may be diminished among Native American people.

counseling with native americans in their cultural context

Counseling with Native Americans has its own set of challenges. Native Americans may view counseling with suspicion. Some researchers have suggested that Native American people believe the construct of mental illness has been imposed on Native Americans and that mental health treatment is a potential form of social control (Walker & LaDue, 1986; Whaley, 1998) that parallels the social control established by centuries of legislative injustice. Additionally, some tribal groups attach great stigma to alcohol abuse, substance abuse, and other mental health problems (Grandbois, 2005). However, if counselors understand the social justice challenges that are faced by Native American clients and use strategies that are set firmly in Native American culture and worldviews, they could increase the likelihood of successful counseling outcomes.

Many differing customs exist among Native American tribes and people. Moreover, tribes have been influenced differently by historical events such as isolation versus urbanization, the acculturation of tribal members, and national policies regarding the treatment of Native Americans. However, some common cultural values can be used to treat trauma-based and other mental health disorders among Native American people. For example, Native Americans typically believe that the good of the tribe, group, or family unit supersedes the good of the individual. Shared values, shared power, shared sustenance, and cooperation are primary ways to relate. Patience is important because decisions are made by consensus. Speech is indirect and humor is dry, relying on shared contexts and meanings. Native American families often encompass an extended family structure rather than a nuclear family structure (Garrett

& Garrett, 2002). The basis for respect is acknowledging the equality of all beings and allowing others to make choices for themselves.

Spirituality is also of primary importance to Native American people. Whether Christian or traditional in religious beliefs and practices, the most important aspect of Native American spirituality is the all-encompassing way it is practiced (Garrett & Garrett, 2002). Native Americans tend to bring spirituality into everyday life. All things are viewed as connected, and the spiritual dimensions of life are honored throughout the day. Thanks are given to God for sustenance and to creatures, who give their lives that people may be fed, clothed, and sheltered. Asking the Creator for help in both important and mundane things is viewed as honorable and important. Incorporating these spiritual and cultural understandings into the counseling process could help Native American clients restore their sense of balance, harmony, unity, and racial identity subsequent to experiences that have caused trauma (Garrett & Garrett, 2002).

conducting culturally sensitive counseling with native americans

For the counselor, helping Native Americans come to terms with transgenerational trauma through culturally sensitive counseling is a first step in bringing closure to negative psychological experiences and establishing greater mental health. Just as with other trauma survivors, assisting Native Americans to encounter the past, talk about feelings, make sense of experiences, grieve losses, and commit to new futures can diminish the effects of past events.

Only a few treatments for transgenerational and other trauma among Native Americans have been studied empirically. In one study conducted with Native American patients with dissociative disorder diagnoses (Wiand, 2004), listening to traditional music played on a Native American flute led to integration of affect and memory, significant decreases in anxiety, and increases in perceptions of interconnectedness. Listening to new age placebo music did not have these effects.

In a pilot study conducted with Native American middle school children with PTSD (Morsette et al., 2009), 3 of the 4 participants who received a cognitive behavioral intervention for trauma at their schools seemed to experience less depression and anxiety after 10 weeks. The intervention focused on increasing social support through parent and teacher education, reducing maladaptive thinking that can drive depressive and anxious moods, relaxation training, graded exposure to aversive stimuli, and processing of traumatic experiences.

Finally, a psychoeducational intervention focusing on reducing the effects of grief concerning historical trauma was tested among Native American service providers and community leaders (Heart, 1998). Results showed that increasing awareness of the traumatic events experienced by previous generations and helping participants share their grief reactions with each other provided

cathartic relief, a reduction in the effects of this grief, a more positive self-identity, and a greater commitment to individual and community healing. Although the participants in this study did not necessarily have diagnoses of trauma-related disorders, this treatment could help in the prevention of developing these types of disorders and in the reduction of some of the grief-related effects of trauma.

Although few empirically validated studies for trauma treatment among Native American people exist, we suggest that counselors should consider assessing for trauma even when other types of mental health challenges are evident. We further suggest that counselors use treatment modalities that are based on Native American cultural values and customs. For example, conducting counseling on a shared-power basis between counselor and client, helping Native American clients seek support from extended family members, and using treatment strategies that include traditional ceremonies (e.g., sweat lodges or smudging) and traditional prayers (Pope, 2002) could help relieve trauma symptoms. For Native Americans that are struggling with their racial/cultural identities, counselors could help them explore their histories and understand and honor the coping mechanisms used by family and community members who have experienced oppression, shame, or hurt. Such practices can go far in helping Native Americans to gain even more courage to claim those parts of themselves they have previously rejected.

conclusion

Helping Native American people establish a new sense of racial identity, cultural identity, and cultural pride can assist them in healing from the effects of social injustice and setting new goals for living healthy lives that are self-determined rather than determined by values and attitudes that are important to others. Providing counseling services for Native American people could have great and lasting benefits for people who have been oppressed and dispossessed for hundreds of years. We hope that counselors who have opportunities to work with Native American clients will continue to explore ways to successfully provide counseling to a very important segment of North American societies, Native Americans.

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