


18

NORTH AMERICAN INDIAN AND ALASKA NATIVE SPIRITUALITY AND PSYCHOTHERAPY

JEFF KING, JOSEPH E. TRIMBLE, GAYLE SKEWENNIO MORSE, AND LISA REY THOMAS

An invisible and continuous life was believed to permeate all things, seen and unseen. . . . Through this mysterious life and power all things are related to one another, and to man, the seen to the unseen, the dead to the living, a fragment of anything to its entirety.

—A. Fletcher and F. La Flesche, The Omaha Tribe

These words are reflective of not just the Omaha tribal belief of Wokanda, they also represent the way in which people of North American Indian tribes describe the mysterious reality that affects their lives. They convey the major theme of this chapter—a theme exemplified in the ancient and reemerging worldviews of North American Indigenous populations concerning spirit and spirituality (O’Beirne, 2008). At core is the belief that spirituality binds mind, body, heart, and spirit to the larger world and is omniscient, omnipresent, and omnipotent. For many North American Indians and Alaska Natives, this belief is indelible and unassailable, woven so tightly within the fabric of their belief systems that they are rarely given any

450 TAN AND DONG

http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0372-4371-128
Handbook of Psychology and Religious Diversity, Second Edition, P. S. Richards and A. E. Bering (Editors) Copyright © 2014 by the American Psychological Association. All rights reserved.

451
open consideration but rather guide how one interacts with all beings both seen and unseen, animate and "inanimate." For many non-Native people, this approach to spirit, spirituality, and understanding the natural world can be confusing and is often dismissed as animistic, ethereal, and lacking in "demonstrable" evidence.

Vine Deloria Jr., an esteemed Native scholar, was asked, "What would you say is the fundamental difference between the Western and Indigenous ways of life?" He replied,

I think the primary difference is that Indians experience and relate to a living universe, whereas Western people—especially scientists—reduce all things, living or not, to objects. The implications of this are immense. If you see the world around you as a collection of objects for you to manipulate and exploit, you will inevitably destroy the world while attempting to control it. . . . Science exists, at a great price in understanding, that the observer be as detached as possible from the event he or she is observing. (Jensen, 2000, p. 6)

These critical differences can have important implications when working with a Native client. To discern what is spiritual and sacred among North American Indigenous people, psychotherapists and counselors must be willing to set aside the Western worldview that divides the world into physical and spiritual and the subject from the object. Such separation of the elements from one another would be seen as an anomaly to a traditional Indian and increasingly to the emerging younger generations of Native people. For many Native Indigenous people, there is no divide or separation, but all is an integral part of life.

In general, Western science has anchored itself within a system that values "objectivity," scientific method, skepticism, and expectations that phenomena occur in a linear, causal, and relational manner and can be manipulated without regard for future consequences. The present claims of psychology as objective, value free, and universal are in reality deeply emmeshed with Euro-American values that champion rational, liberal, individualistic, and materialistic (as opposed to spiritual) ideals (Kim, Park, & Park, 2000). Furthermore, it elevates its epistemology above other epistemologies, attributing their ways of knowing as inferior, primitive, and unsophisticated (Schurich & Young, 2002; Smith, 2007). In reality, North American Indigenous people have been just as scientific, systematic, and philosophical as their Western scientist counterparts in their attempts to understand the world and its phenomena. Native people continue to use different methodologies to understand how lives are lived and the realities that surround them in addition to blending Western scientific approaches with those in use for thousands of years (Cajete, 2000; Piacco, 2003). For example, the Inuqtuq within their spiritual worldview recognized that corn, squash, and beans were the three Sisters of the Earth. Because they were seen as compatible spirits inhabiting a certain place and order in this world, they were always planted together. Only recently has Western scientific method "discovered" that the three plants together produce a natural nitrogen cycle that keeps the land fertile and productive (Deloria & Wildcat, 2001). Certainly, Native Indigenous people’s appreciation of the sacred and spiritual permits a breadth of perspective that the conventional scientific model does not.

The notions of scientific supremacy within conventional science are displayed when psychologists suggest that they must go into these communities and conduct research with predetermined research protocols focused on real or imposed pathologies in order to determine what are being referred to in modern medicine and treatment as "best practices." (Kasdin, 2008). In fact, this is what has been happening over the decades, with little to show in terms of improving psychological services to Native communities (President’s New Freedom Commission on Mental Health, 2003). Fortunately, as more Indigenous scientists enter the field of research and as Indigenous communities become sophisticated partners in Western research, this type of "helicopter research" has become less acceptable (Thomas, Donovan, & Sigo, 2010). The ability to understand North American Indigenous perspectives and experiences with spirituality, religion, healing, and psychology begins with a recognition of the limitations of Western science. Staying within the contemporary and conventional scientific grid can hinder one’s capacity to comprehend Native American spiritual ways of being.

From a counseling standpoint, choice of a mental health provider apart from traditional healers is a choice often associated with distrust, misunderstanding, and apprehension because of the great possibility that mental health practitioners may be ignorant or insensitive to the cultural backgrounds, worldviews, and historical experiences of Indian and Native clients, or possibly even worse—they may be appropriating and misusing cultural knowledge. Clients’ presenting problems may be misunderstood, misinterpreted, and/or distorted by Western protocol, resulting in diagnoses and misdiagnoses guided by a different cultural worldview.

Finally, even the mere assumption that the appropriate placement of therapy is in a therapy room in a clinic may be difficult for non-Native clinicians to reconsider, as may the expectation that credentials or degrees, so valued by Western psychology, mean very little compared to the quality of the therapeutic relationship. Traditional Native people are likely to be assessing the counselor in light of whether he or she speaks truthfully and whether he or she can connect spiritually or not. It is not necessary for the counselor to embrace the specific beliefs of the tribal person. However, it is extremely important that the counselor hold the sacred and spiritual in highest regard.
and with respect and cultural humility. Anything less will hinder the therapeutic relationship.

In this chapter, we focus primarily on traditional Native beliefs. It is important to note that traditional beliefs and practices were not "underground" by necessity after contact with Whites in many communities because traditional spiritual practices were outlawed for most Indigenous people until the American Indian Religious Freedom Act of 1978. This Act promised to “protect and preserve for American Indians their inherent right of freedom to believe, express, and exercise” traditional religions, “including but not limited to access to sites, use and possession of sacred objects, and the freedom to worship through ceremonial and traditional rites” (American Indian Religious Freedom Act of 1978). This allowed for the re-emergence of traditional healing practices for Native people. In this chapter, we also provide a general overview of what this essence contains for North American Indigenous peoples. We discuss selected lifeways and thoughtways of Native people in which the spiritual and the sacred are intricately woven into the framework of traditions, customs, ceremonies, rituals, and everyday life. Additionally, sections are devoted to illustrate how spirituality and the sacred are becoming integral components of healing in the emerging fields of multicultural counseling and psychotherapy—especially what is being offered in "Indian country" (a general euphemism for describing where Native people live).

Although the research literature on North American Indian spirituality is thin at best, there is some testimony that the keen insights derived from the spiritual and sacred placed within health professions are not only effective but powerful and can advance the field of psychology.

THE HETEROGENEITY OF TRIBAL AND VILLAGE SPIRITUAL BELIEFS AND PRACTICES

We caution against the tendency to assume that there is a single Indigenous perspective; the heterogeneity of tribal and village spiritual beliefs and practices requires attention. It is essential to understand the extraordinarily diverse cultural, geographic, demographic, and individual identity characteristics of the groups that make up North America's Indigenous populations as well as their unique histories with regard to colonization and imposition of federal policies. There are over 550 federally recognized tribes and 150 language groups within the United States. Native American Indians reside in all of Canada's provinces and in all of the United States (Trimble & Gonzales, 2008). As a result of centuries of colonization, much of Indian country has become de-Indigenized and Christianized, with variations in how this has played out both between and within tribes. For many Native people, Indigenous and non-Indigenous beliefs and practices are not experienced as mutually exclusive but rather held and practiced simultaneously (O'Brien, 2008). There are Native Christians who feel strongly that integration is possible, vital, and restorative (Baldridge, 1996). However, there are no data that describe the degree to which Christianity has affected the over 550 federally recognized tribes; until research methods and ethics evolve, this will remain true. Additionally, delving into these multifaceted iterations of acculturation related to religion/spirituality and one's acculturative status would be overwhelming and would tend to miss the more central dynamics that have preserved tribal identities over time and in spite of multiple efforts and levels of historical hostilities, atrocities, and genocide. What is more remarkable is the resilience and strength to survive, and increasingly thrive, and to retain cultural identities in spite of hundreds of years of oppression.

THE SPIRITUAL AND THE SACRED

Most Native concepts capture "spirit" with one or two words, if any. For example, what is commonly known as spirit in the English language, the Lakota call wakan. Wakan means both mystery and holiness, and it is used by the Lakota to designate all that is sacred, mysterious, spiritual, or supernatu-ral. The Supreme Being or Creator of the Lakota is called Wakan-Tanka. In the 19th century, a Lakota elder, Good Bear, stated that, Wakan was anything that was hard to understand. A rock was sometimes wakan. Anything might be wakan. When anyone did something that no one understood, that was wakan. If the thing done was what no one could understand it was wakan. How the world was made was wakan. How the sun was made was wakan. How men used to talk to animals and birds was wakan. Where the spirits and ghosts are is wakan. How the spirits act is wakan. A spirit is wakan. (Wallace, 1980, p. 70)

In the English language, this name is commonly rendered as the "The Great Spirit," but it would be translated more correctly as "The Great Holy-Mystery" (Currie, 1968, p. 32). The Muscogee Creek use the term boho "tewa," which encompasses "all my relations"—male, female, human and nonhuman, known and unknown, all part of a continuum of energy that is at the heart of the universe (Chaudière & Chaudière, 2001). Numerous tribes—such as the Tlingit, Ojibwa, Chayenne, Arapahoe, Kiowa, and Osage—have similar words to convey spirit. The closest Christian/Jewish/Islamic concept for this comes from the scripture that describes God as "too mysterious to understand" (Judges 13:18).

NORTH AMERICAN INDIAN AND ALASKA NATIVE SPIRITUALITY
American Indian and Native spirituality is centered on the Creator and on human beings' unique, personal relationship with the Creator. By definition, spirituality is everywhere, imbued in all of life (earth, beings, rocks, trees, animals, wind, humans, etc.). Indeed, the Mohawk grandmothers tell us that the spirit is a form of energy that vibrates in nature and the universe. They say that the spirit is part of you when your body is alive and continues to exist even when your body is of no more use (Karontiwaqua Thomas, Katsigiesewa, and Judy Hemlock, personal communication, September 2, 2012). Although, historically, this view has been seen as primitive and animistic, by simply substituting the word spirit with energy, we have quantum physics' definition of energy/matter. In fact, Chaudhuri and Chaudhuri (2001) offered a modern interpretation of Muscogee Creek concepts of the spiritual:

There is, however, a single, unifying principle in the universe that links every manifestation of body, mind and spirit. This unifying principle is energy. . . . It is termed Hejfoje [emphasis added], which covers everything and within which both rest and motion exist. (p. 23)

It encompasses human relationships with all beings. The sacred teachings come from oral traditions, some over 8,000 years old. Interestingly, this concept, commonly held by most tribes, has been derived independently from any other known source.

In contrast to the dominant Western European view that humans are superior to the rest of creation, Native people see themselves as part of creation (Swinomish Tribal Mental Health Project, 2002). Many terms of spirituality (encompassing health, well-being, and social responsibility) embrace this idea. Muskwa Csyin is Lakota for "all my relations," implying a responsibility to all of life. People, animals, and nature are regarded as relatives. Hóhsí is Diné (Navajo) for the responsibility to live in balance with all of life, and Ellam-inis is Yup’ik for the "eye of awareness" representing the central power of the universe. Peace and wholeness comes through living in balance with this power. Thus, the central purpose in life is for people to take care of the earth and to serve others. The care of the earth is deeply embedded in the spiritual system and is enacted in ceremony as a reaffirmation of their connection to the land. Many tribes identify sacred places without which the ceremonies may not be possible, such as in the Lakota Sundance Ceremony, the Tao Pueblo sacred journey to Blue Lake, or the Iroquois Green Corn Ceremony. Personal well-being cannot be separate from one’s interconnectedness to this purpose. In this context of all things related, Native peoples’ spirituality also encompasses healing from and overcoming the effects of colonization (O’Brien, 2008).

Across many North American tribes, this way of life contains the same meaning. The Diné emphasize harmony and beauty in relationships and community. For the Lakota, one can choose to follow the Red Road or the Black Road, each of which presents unique challenges for the proper way to live. For the Inupiat Eskimo, altruism, or "well-being," is a state of being in which one experiences a healthy body, inner harmony, and a "good feeling within" oneself. For the Ojibwe, the Seven Council Fires of Life mark significant transitions through life stages. Locust (1995) pointed out that Native American Indians believe that each individual chooses to make himself well or to make himself unwell. If one stays in harmony, keeps all the tribal laws and the sacred laws, one’s spirit will be so strong that negativity will be unable to affect it. Once harmony is broken, however, the spiritual self is weakened and one becomes vulnerable to physical illness, mental and/or emotional stress, and the disharmony projected by others. Many American Indians believe they are responsible for their own well-being. They can make themselves well and they can make themselves unwell. . . . Therefore, keeping one’s spirit strong and keeping oneself in harmony precludes unwellness. . . . The idea of this powerful protective shield of harmony is articulated in song by the Navajo: "Beauty is above me, beauty is before me, beauty is all around me." (p. 228)

This "path" or "way of living" provides the individual with traditionally grounded directions and guidelines for living a life free of emotional turmoil, confusion, animosity, unhappiness, poor health, and conflict-ridden interpersonal and intergroup relations. The goal of traditional spiritual beliefs and practices is to provide assistance for the individual and/or community to once again find the "straight path" or way back to the circle and balance. This belief underlies the Diné’s (among other tribes) distrust of Western medicine because of the lack of concern as to whether the patient’s life is in balance, or whether their own life is in balance when they intervene with pills or surgery (Schwartz, 2008). Lori Alvord, the first female Navajo surgeon, put it this way: "Although a surgical procedure focuses on a single organ, I always tried to stay aware of the whole person—organs, mind, and spirit, the harmony of their entire being" (Alvord & Van Pelt, 1999, p. 111).

PSYCHOLOGICAL MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES AND NORTH AMERICAN INDIAN SPIRITUALITY

Considerable discussion has taken place concerning counseling paradigm shifts and the manner in which counseling and mental health services are offered to Indian and Native individuals and communities. Rather than
focusing exclusively on how to use and/or adapt Western perspectives of healing, many are describing and proposing models of healing derived from a Native American Indian perspective. A few authors have recommended that counselors establish working relationships with traditional healers (BigFoot & Schmidt, 2009; Duran, 2006; Gone, 2010; King, 2009, 2012; Mills, 2004; Nebelkopf & King, 2004), and some community-run centers have developed model approaches that integrate conventional and traditional healing (Wieman, 2009). Such collaboration with an Indigenous healing system can take several forms. The therapist and 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. Currently, interest in the spiritual and the sacred is accelerating within Indian and Native communities. Previously suppressed tribal ceremonies and rituals are resurfacing in untold numbers across North America (DeMaio & Parks, 1987; McCua, 1992; Mohanty & Eagle Elk, 2000; Sullivan, 2000). This resurgence in spirituality represents "the realm of ultimate freedom" and a different way of "orienting to reality, a way that is based on awe, reverence, and a deep appreciation of the Unity of All Being" (Lerner, 2000, pp. 7, 31).

Counseling psychologists and social workers, too, are expressing and advocating the importance of including spiritual perspectives within treatment modalities and clinical sessions with Native clients (Fukuyama & Sevig, 1999; Hodge & Limb, 2010; King, 2012; Naadeo & Young, 2008; Voos, Douville, Little Soldier, & Twiss, 1999). The interest is more widespread than one might imagine, given that spirituality is rarely a formal part of counseling or social work education programs. Though not specific to Native American communities but illustrative of this point, Canda and Furman (2010) surveyed members of the National Association of Social Workers and found that more than 85% of respondents reported that they helped clients consider the spiritual meaning and purpose of their current life situation; more than 75% indicated that they helped clients develop religious/spiritual rituals as a clinical intervention; and more than 20% reported that they have physically touched clients for "healing" purposes.

Counselors with humility, respect, and appreciation for spirituality and others' worldviews are in an advantageous position to work effectively with Indian and Native clients (Dafrene & Coleman, 1992; Trujillo, 2000). Spirituality and holism are synonymous constructs that are essential elements within the traditional belief systems of many Indians and Natives (Roberts, Harper, Turtle-Eagle-Bull, & Heideman-Provoost, 1998). Although the deep meanings of spirituality vary from one individual or tribe to another, for most the sacred encompasses harmony, balance, vision, relationships, transcendence, and connectedness (M. T. Garrett & Wilbur, 1999; McCormick, 1995–1996). Of course, these very elements are at the core of the establishment of trusting, long-term relationships between people. Openness to and respect for these values can promote a healthier and more stable world for all.

A good number of therapists and counselors working in this way with Native clients have reported relatively good outcomes. Whittuck, McMorris, Hoyt, Stubben, and LaFrenboise (2002) found that engagement in traditional practices serves as a buffer to depression as well as the effects of discrimination. J. Garrett and Garrett (1998) described the use of the "sacred circle" and its related symbolism in an "innercircle" form of group therapy and how the Native perspective can facilitate client progress. Using a variant of a process-oriented training that is grounded in spirituality, Lewis, Duran, and Woods (1999) found that the technique can allow therapists to enter into a non-Western-based reality with their clients, thus enhancing their sensitivity to and respect for Native worldviews. Similarly, King (2009) described the use of trance linked to tribal values as an effective treatment for current and historical trauma. Heilbrun and Gutman (2000) used a traditional aboriginal "healing circle" with both non-Aboriginal and First Nations women who were survivors of child sexual abuse and found that both groups responded favorably to the approach. The use of sweat lodges and talking circles as means for promoting client participation and retention is receiving some attention in the multicultural counseling literature (Walkingstick & Larry-Osborne, 1995). Specifically, Colmant and Merta (1999) described the effectiveness of incorporating a sweat lodge ceremony in the treatment of Navajo youths who were diagnosed with behavioral disruptive disorders. They showed how the ceremony has considerable overlap with conventional forms of group therapy and thus merits consideration in the treatment of Native youths.

Wilson (2007) reported significant symptom reduction for Native American Vietnam veterans who participated in Lakota sweat lodge ceremony and discussed the psychological dimensions involved in this type of approach. Johnson, Feldman, Labin, and Southwick (1995) also found that the use of traditional North American Indian ceremonies, such as sweat lodge and honoring pow-wows, was effective in treating posttraumatic stress disorder among veterans (see also Cross, 2007). Holan (1990) specifically addressed the effectiveness of Native traditional approaches to addressing psychological difficulties experienced by Native American veterans of the Vietnam War.

NATIVE SPIRITUALITY AND ALCOHOL AND DRUG ABUSE RECOVERY PROGRAMS

Native clients with alcohol and drug abuse problems also may require unique attention (Beauvais & Trimble, 2002; Oetting & Beauvais, 1990). Intervention and treatment techniques that follow the recommendations...
made earlier in this chapter may be effective in many cases, but because of the complexity of the problem of substance abuse among Native populations, treatment effectiveness may be compromised. Substance abuse counselors may need to develop a respect and appreciation for the spirituality that is strongly entrenched in Indigenous communities. Research has shown that infusing traditional spirituality in alcohol recovery programs for Natives, coupled with a multicultural counseling perspective, can enhance outcome effectiveness (Navarro, Wilson, Berger, & Taylor, 1997). Kelley (2008) noted the importance of recognizing early tribal efforts, dating as far back as 1737, focusing on the need for retention of traditions and spirituality as key to recovery.

Thus, the influence of spirituality in promoting recovery from alcoholism in Indian Country is slowly gaining support (Abbott, 1998; Garrou, Goldberg, Beals, Herrell, & Manno, 2003; Grant, 1995; Kelley, 2008). For example, The People Awakening Project was a collaborative relationship between community members and university scientists that emphasized the role of traditional beliefs and spirituality in advancing sobriety. The project developed over several years into an effort to identify protective and resilience factors among Alaska Natives who recover from or do not abuse alcohol; the project heavily relied on the traditional knowledge and wisdom of the Alaska Native communities involved in the long-term project (Hazel & Mohatt, 2001). The approach drew from community psychology, specifically community-based participatory research perspectives that attend to the context of community, empowerment, and the emphasis on the culturally resonant ethical conduct of the research team (Allen et al., 2006; Mohatt et al., 2004). A Muscogee Creek medicine man who also worked in an American Indian substance abuse treatment center reported that those who chose a more Native traditional approach did not relapse. He said that the spiritual connection made through the traditional approach filled the empty or wounded place inside that they were trying to fix by using alcohol (George Coster, personal communication, July 5, 2005). Dunen (2006) spoke of alcohol addiction as a spiritual problem, more specifically that there is a “spirit of alcohol” (p. 61) that needs a spiritual intervention for recovery to occur.

In a unique study involving spirituality and alcohol use, Stone, Whitbeck, Chen, Johnson, and Olson (2006) investigated the influence of enculturation and related constructs that included traditional practices, traditional spirituality, and cultural identity to identify the mechanisms through which traditional culture affects alcohol cessation. The study consisted of a sample of 980 American Indians from four reservations in the upper Midwest and five Canadian First Nation reserves. Overall, the findings provide supportive empirical evidence that traditional Native and Indian practices and traditional spirituality positively influence alcohol cessation; however, the

researchers cautioned that the data are cross-sectional and therefore do not indicate the direction of effects. They suggested that future studies on the topic should take on a longitudinal format.

Local and regional organizations are increasingly encouraging and promoting the infusion of Native healing practices and spiritual beliefs in addiction recovery programs. Coyhis and Simonelli (2008) described the importance of the Wellbriety Movement—an empowerment group based on the idea that recovery from alcohol and drug addiction can more effectively occur with the assistance of culture-specific traditions and spiritual practices in American Indian and Alaska Native communities. In this approach, communities imbued recovery approaches that make up the field’s best practices, but they infuse cultural and ethnic strengths into their addictions recovery programs. Reflecting on a long-term commitment to research on American Indian alcohol use and spirituality, Spicer, Besdek, Manno, and Beals (2007) concluded that many Indian and Native substance abusers find that traditional healing systems will strongly contribute to ending lifetimes of alcohol use and abuse; the healing systems are deeply embedded in tribal religious and spiritual practices and, more generally, in religious and spiritual practices and orientations. As increasing numbers of researchers are American Indian/Alaska Native, and as Indigenous communities engage in research as full partners, we may see the literature on the role of spirituality in prevention, treatment, recovery, sobriety, and wellness develop further (e.g., Thomas, Donovan, Sigo, Austin, & Marlatt, 2009).

**AN “AMERICAN INDIAN” PSYCHOLOGY?**

It is important to note that the practice of an “American Indian” psychology is not simply the application of ritual or ceremony to conventional psychotherapy. There is acknowledgment by Native practitioners that there is a spiritual force that guides the healing process and underlies American Indian psychology (Duran, 2006; King, 2009). There is a strong conviction derived from experience that this spiritual force pervades all of life and works toward moving us toward wholeness and well-being. Many practitioners in Indian Country who trust this power report countless “remarkable events” that occur beyond the scope of their own therapeutic plans or ideas (Duran, 2006; King, 2012). Within this context, place, ritual, and ceremony, among other tribally recognized valences, are powerful avenues through which healing manifests itself. Among these rituals and ceremonies are sweat lodges, smudging (purification), vision quest, Smoke House, trance states, and journeys to places of power. Leroy Little Bear, a Blackfoot (Siksika) elder from Canada, once addressed a group of American Indian psychologists with this
statement, "You psychologists talk about identity crises. I'll tell you what an identity crisis is: It is when you do not know the land and the land does not know you" (Leroy Little Bear, personal communication, June, 18, 2007). Many clients benefit from connection to the land, especially places that hold power or significance for them (Dobria & Wildcat, 2001).

For non-Native practitioners who will be working with Native people, it is of central importance to understand and acknowledge the spiritual realm, ceremony, and sacred quality of places, persons, and life and to do so with the utmost respect and cultural humility. Although traditional healing has been passed down through the generations, not all choose or have opportunity for participation. Individual Native people may be active participants in these practices but look to traditional healers—not counselors—for this knowledge.

CAREFUL USE OF SPIRITUALITY IN MENTAL HEALTH PROGRAMS

Although incorporating traditional spiritual and healing methods such as the sweat lodge and talking circles can facilitate counselor effectiveness, client retention, and progress under controlled circumstances, decisions to use such techniques must be made with a strong degree of caution, respect, and humility. LaDuke (1994) strongly recommended that non-Indian counselors abstain from participating in and using such practices, asserting that they should not promote or condone the stealing, appropriation, and inappropriately use of Native spiritual activities. Doing so may invoke ethical considerations, as Native spiritual activities and practices are the sole responsibility of recognized and respected Native healers and elders. Indeed, there is currently high interest in spirituality worldwide, and part of this growing interest involves the exploitation and appropriation of traditional Indian and Native ceremonies without the consent of Indigenous healers. Matheson (1986) maintained that non-Native individuals who use traditional Native American Indian spiritual healing practices are under mistaken, even dangerous, impressions and, as a consequence, are showing grave disrespect for the Indigenous origins, contexts, and practices of these traditions by Native peoples. As mentioned previously, some tribes forbid the communication of sacred beliefs to the outside world (see, e.g., Swinomish Tribal Mental Health Project, 2002). In fact, a number of tribes hold the belief that if you do so, it will bring harm to the community as well as to the giver and the person receiving the information.

There is controversy among tribal peoples over whether to share sacred knowledge with nontribal members, especially Euro Americans. Anyone with a cursory knowledge of Indian–White relations and history of federal Indian law and policy can understand why this might be the case. However, some tribal members believe that they were given this knowledge to share with others, not to keep it only for themselves. What is critical in this process is that the knowledge be preserved intact; that is, if the knowledge is shared, it must be shared with nothing lost from the full meaning and context, and the recipient of the shared knowledge must understand and respect the obligations that come with this sharing. To share knowledge without retaining the full meaning and to be unaware of the obligations is to pollute the “power” or “medicine.” Within tribes, words contain power and thus must be used respectfully. If the essence of a counseling relationship is built on trust, rapport, and respect, then the exploitation and appropriation of Indigenous traditional healing ceremonies and practices for use in counseling sessions will undoubtedly undermine a counselor’s efforts to gain acceptance from the Indian community and the client.

The essence of the healing relationship is best captured with the words of Joseph Eagle Elk, a 20th-century Lakota healer:

The medicine man is not the only expert. Everyone has a purpose. Everyone is born to a family and a community for a reason. Like I explained about the tobacco, or the tree, or the animals. We are all alive, all have a purpose, and we all help each other. So each of us must learn to pay attention to what we learn from our dreams, what the animals tell us, and what nature says. (Malchiodi & Eagle Elk, 2000, p. 42)

Similarly, the conventionally trained therapist is not the only expert.

CASE STUDY: ACCULTURATIVE STATUS OF THE INDIAN CLIENT

An Indian client’s responsiveness to counseling is not necessarily a function of where he or she was raised. Rather, it would appear that acculturation is a potential contributor to a client’s receptivity to therapy in a conventional sense. Like many other ethnic minorities and culturally distinctive people in North America, Indians express the full range of acculturation. Many, regardless of age, are traditional and native oriented; others are transitional in the sense that they reflect an understanding and appreciation of tribal–specific folkways yet recognize the value of internalizing the values and beliefs of the dominant, more progressive culture; and others, whether because of geographic isolation from their ancestral homes, historic cultural oppression, or personal choice, have fully internalized the folkways of modern society.

To illustrate the responsiveness of more traditional Native American clients to counseling, a case study taken from case records has been condensed
for review. Of note, a traditional, native-oriented Indian is more likely to receive assistance from kin, friends, and traditional healers or shamans than from a counselor. Personal information for the client has been changed to prevent identification.

Joanne, a 44-year-old American Indian woman from the coastal region of the Pacific Northwest, was taken to an Indian Health Service clinic by her two female cousins after they found her wandering aimlessly on a small beach near the reservation. After what appeared to be a thorough examination, the physician concluded that the woman was severely depressed, was acutely undernourished, suffered from hallucinations, and was in desperate need of sleep and relaxation. Although Joanne was reluctant to talk with the physician, she did confide some of her thoughts with one cousin, who in turn passed the information along to the physician. From what the cousin could gather, Joanne had not eaten a full meal for about 3 weeks, had averaged only 3 to 4 hours of sleep per night for about 1 month, and had been absent from work for the week prior to her being discovered on the beach.

Joanne's parents died in a tragic boating accident when she was 4 years of age. After living with her father's sister for a year, she had moved in with her father's parents, who raised her to adulthood. Joanne's grandparents, by most standards, were very traditional and very spiritual in their ways: They spoke their native language in the home and on occasion at social and ceremonial gatherings, gathered and preserved native foods, hunted and fished and smoked their catches, and in general abided by customs of a century or so ago. They were active in Indian religious and ceremonial activities and in every way possible involved Joanne. Joanne followed the traditional ways of her grandparents and passed the knowledge along to her two daughters.

When Joanne was in her mid-20s, she learned that her grandparents were highly regarded shamans, or spirit healers. About the same time, she also learned a good deal about sorcery and about various methods used by those who practiced on the darker side. On a few occasions, partially out of bitterness and dislike for certain tribal members, including her estranged husband, she had made use of sorcery to seek revenge and repress. And her actions had not gone unnoticed.

After the physician's diagnosis and through the insistence of her cousins, Joanne was referred to a local mental health therapist. The therapist's intervention efforts were greeted with great reluctance by Joanne, who seemingly avoided disclosing any of her thoughts and feelings. Concluding that his efforts were in vain, the therapist confided in a highly regarded local spirit healer (shaman), who agreed to work with Joanne. The therapist discussed the matter with her, and Joanne also agreed to the arrangement. She appeared to respond to the healer's efforts, and it seemed that her "problem" had been resolved.

From what the therapist could surmise from her discussions with Joanne's cousin, she apparently had been the target of sorcery instigated in all likelihood by someone who had been victimized by her many years ago. It seemed that Joanne had discovered one evening that someone had sprinkled her personal belongings with a powder made from certain herbs and roots—the sinister mixture was used to capture someone's soul, and Joanne's dysfunctional behavior was typical of people who had lost their souls. If intervention had not occurred through the restoration of her soul, Joanne, like many others who had experienced soul loss, might have mysteriously died or disappeared.

In this case, the therapist had to identify and be sensitive to the client's degree of acculturation; in this case, the client came from a traditional background and maintained this worldview. Joanne's therapist recognized almost immediately that she was reluctant to discuss the problem with him. She, too, knew that he was in no position to assist her. Yet, he was helpful in an oblique way, as he not only facilitated the arrangement with the local shaman but also affirmed the importance of the helping medium and Joanne's preferred manner of dealing with her personal problems.

CONCLUSION

This chapter presents important elements and dynamics related to American Indian spirituality and religion. Spirituality is at the heart of traditional North American Indian culture. It is the "organizing principle" by which all community activities, knowledge, identification, relationships, practices, and religions are derived. In traditional Native cultures, spirituality is not just seen as the core but rather is infused throughout all ways of life. The processes by which traditional Native peoples go about relating to life are drastically different from the processes utilized by Western science and psychology. In fact, knowledge of these traditional ways cannot be obtained through the scientific grid. Furthermore, a different attitude and mind-set toward the universe in which we live—including living and nonliving entities and obligations to past and future generations as well as toward one's position in life, power, space, and time—are necessary before one can begin to grasp Native American Indian traditional knowledge. Native spirituality and religion are not static but are, and are expected to be, continually evolving. Tribal or community understanding may deepen and/or change over time, and religious practices may undergo transformation. Yet, the essence of tribal spirituality remains the same, the essence containing that of change and transformation.

Native traditional ways and spirituality can be unique to an individual, but the individual is not constrained in the same way as Western European
culture construes the individual. Rather, the individual is seen as part of his or her community, and his or her purposes and gifts are directly tied to community functioning. An individual spiritual experience (e.g., a vision during a vision quest) is not solely for the person but is for the whole community. In light of this, tribal religious practices are recognized as an outward ritual of the communally shared essence of spirituality. This, too, is not person-centric, as many of the religious practices honor the animals, plants, and land that share and contribute to our life together.

We have acknowledged that there is tremendous diversity among individuals, tribes, and communities in terms of both spirituality and religion. Yet, common themes exist across these groups. Tied into the cosmology of most, if not all, North American Indian tribes is the importance of harmony, balance, vision, relationships, transcendence, connectedness, humility, respect, obligation, and mystery. Although there is no denying the schisms and conflicts that exists within and between tribes regarding spirituality and religious practices, it is remarkable that these values have endured. Further complications have been introduced by colonization, oppression, disease, relocation, the maintenance of tribal language, acculturation, and the degree and way Christianity has had its impact upon Native peoples.

Thus, it cannot be underscored enough how remarkable it is that the essence of tribal spirituality has survived genocide and centuries of assimilation policies. Not only this, but there also has been a growing momentum among Native peoples to thrive, reclaim, and allow this essence to flourish and inform our tribes and communities. It is now recognized that traditional teachings and spirituality serve as protective factors and improve treatment strategies in the areas of physical and mental health.

Psychotherapy is now being redefined within American Indian cultures. There is a strong sense among practitioners as well as findings among researchers that inclusion of spirituality and collaboration with traditional healers and elders in the counseling process and intervention programs create better outcomes. Furthermore, it is recognized that the counselor mindset must be open and flexible in order to accept and respect the local tribal beliefs and lifeways. When therapy is offered in a manner that is congruent with the unique tribal values and spirituality, it actually reverses the historical trend of Native people having to "become White" (adapting strategies derived from Western European values) in order to get better. Now, with counseling increasingly aligning with culture, there is the possibility of receiving treatment that is congruent with one’s own culture, beliefs, and spirituality. As can be seen, this process includes that part of spirituality within Native culture that seeks to reclaim its identity and establishes a greater sense of social justice. Native people would see this as restoring balance. Although these are exciting and promising trends, there are also pitfalls or dangers associated with these endeavors.


Matheson, L. (1986). If you are not an Indian, how do you treat an Indian? In H. P. Leffey & P. B. Pederson (Eds.), Cross-cultural training for mental health professionals (pp. 115–130). Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas.


