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Campus Alberta Master of Counselling Program

Letter of Intent

Integrating Culturally Appropriate Methods into Current Counselling Practice:

The Development of a First Nations Counselling Manual

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September 2005

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Within this letter of intent, the author proposes a final project focusing on the development of a counselling manual that can be used by counsellors and agencies interested in systematically integrating culturally appropriate methods into their current practices in order to enhance the counselling experiences of First Nations people. For the purposes of this project, First Nations people include indigenous people of North America and their descendents excluding the Inuit and Métis. The author will present a statement of the problem, provide a rationale to underscore the importance of the project, highlight the theoretical foundation, and describe a summary of the pertinent literature that supports the need for this project. The procedures for developing the manual will be described and potential implications of the project will be explored.

Problem Statement

First Nations clients are twice as likely as White clients to drop out of counselling after the first session (LaFromboise, Trimble, & Mohatt, 1990). Moreover, First Nations students in grades seven to twelve perceive counselling services as inadequate and, consequently, rarely access counselling despite viewing it as an essential service (Dolan, 1995). The underutilization of culturally appropriate counselling approaches for First Nations people may account for this dissatisfaction (McBride Management Ltd., 2001). In fact, results in a study financed by the Ministry of Education in British Columbia (1997) indicated that First Nations parents and students wanted more culturally appropriate counselling services for First Nations youth and better counsellor training in the areas of cultural knowledge and awareness, and in using effective counselling skills. According to all respondent groups (First Nations parents, First

Nations students, and counsellors providing services to First Nations youth), cultural sensitivity was deemed critical to the counselling relationship.

First Nations people have experienced historical oppression including colonization, residential schooling, systemic racism, and stereotyping. Due to the impact of historical oppression and the present issues this cultural group faces, Canadian counsellors are likely to be providing their services to First Nations people at some point in their career. From the perspective of White counsellors who work with First Nations clients in and around the Calgary area, clients want their counsellors to understand how their personal and cultural histories contribute to their current experiences (Smith & Morrisette, 2001). Although there is abundant literature focusing on multicultural counselling, there are considerably fewer resources available to guide counsellors in providing culturally appropriate counselling services for First Nations clientele. Developing a manual that supports counsellors and agencies in honouring the needs, values, beliefs, and cultural traditions of First Nations people will facilitate the integration of culturally appropriate methods and policies into current professional counselling practices.

Rationale

In Canada, approximately 3% of the population is of First Nations descent and in the Northwest Territories this proportion rises to 37% (Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, 2004). These statistics hold particular importance to the author, who resides in Canada's North, because the majority of people who access her services are of First Nations descent. The increasing diversity of Canadian culture, along with the inclusion of professional guidelines and codes of ethics addressing the need for sensitivity towards this diversity, points to the importance of integrating culturally appropriate methods into current counselling practices (Canadian Counselling Association, 1999; Canadian Psychological Association, 2000; Casas,

Ponterotto, & Gutierrez, 1986; College of Alberta Psychologists, 2002; Feminist Therapy Institute, 1999; Pettifor, 2001). Furthermore, the perception among First Nations people that counselling services are inadequate and not culturally appropriate combined with increased drop out rates suggest that First Nations people would benefit from receiving more culturally appropriate counselling services. If counsellors want to encourage First Nations People to access their services and remain engaged in the therapeutic process, then it is vital to incorporate methods that First Nations people will respond to in a positive manner in order to enhance the counselling relationship (Arthur & Januszkowski, 2001). The development of a counselling and policy manual to support counsellors in this endeavor is a response to the needs and voices of First Nations people.

Supporting Literature

The theoretical and conceptual foundations for the project are grounded in research and current practice. A critical synthesis of the literature, conducted by the author, revealed that resources available to guide counsellors in providing culturally appropriate counselling services for First Nations clientele are either intended for First Nations counsellors or are not comprehensive. This project is a response to the needs and voices of First Nations people and will result in a comprehensive manual intended for a diverse range of counsellors.

Theoretical Foundation

The theoretical underpinnings for this project are grounded within the feminist perspective. Inherent power imbalances exist within the First Nations counselling context wherein clients from a non-dominant culture are seeking services to overcome difficulties from counsellors who enjoy positions of privilege through their identification with the dominant culture (Cayleff, 1986; Feminist Therapy Institute [FTI], 1999). Furthermore, the dominant

cultural perspective discriminates against people who have different perspectives (Pettifor, 2001). Arthur and Collins (2005) stressed the importance of considering culture in order to understand the experience of all people and argued that this belief is not reflected in current counselling practices. Clients should not be expected to accommodate or adjust to dominant perspectives and practices. Understanding the worldviews of non-dominant populations “is an important step towards de-colonization and facilitation of empowerment” (Poonwassie & Charter, 2001, p. 64).

The majority of First Nations people value social interconnectedness and social responsibility, therefore they are more likely to want to include others in their healing journey (France & McCormick, 1997; McCormick & France, 1995; Thomason, 1991). Moreover, there is a belief that one person’s problem is the community’s problem. This implies that a feminist theoretical orientation would be appropriate in guiding a project aimed at enhancing services for First Nations people because the feminist perspective emphasizes the impact of social and cultural contexts in the development of presenting problems. In fact, several authors have suggested that because many First Nations people have experienced oppression, a counselling orientation based on empowerment and emancipatory themes will assist First Nations clients in overcoming both internalized and externalized forms of oppression (Lafromboise et al., 1990; Peavy & Li, 2003).

Need for the Project

British Columbia’s Ministry of Education (1997) prepared a support workers’ handbook for aboriginal support workers who are employed in elementary and secondary schools. The purpose of the handbook was to assist the support workers in their task of helping First Nations students in achieving success within the school system. The content of the handbook covers

information about working with students, parents, colleagues, and communities. Tips for counselling First Nations students based on Peavy's (1994) research is also provided. France and McCormick (1997) describe a peer counselling training program for First Nations students at the University of British Columbia. Peer counsellors are taught how to combine traditional cultural methods with counselling approaches. As with the Aboriginal support worker's handbook, the peer counselling training program is intended for First Nations peer counsellors. The training consists of three components: (a) helping skills, (b) presenting issues, and (c) networking with community resources.

Counsellors need to be sensitive to the cultural context of their clients (Corey, Corey, & Callanan, 1998; Pettifor, 1998) and infuse the belief systems of their clients in order to maximize the benefit of their services for clients. Moreover, the counselling approach and techniques must fit within the value and belief systems of the client (France & McCormick, 1997; McCormick & France, 1995; Pinderhughes, 1989). Cultural misunderstandings can negatively impact the therapeutic alliance between counsellor and client by creating mistrust and a perception of being devalued. In order for counselling to be effective, the counsellor must first understand how the client views the world. Recognizing and acknowledging cultural differences, learning about cultural beliefs and practices, and accessing consultation and community resources are key components in successful counselling sessions (Arthur & Januszkowski, 2001). A comprehensive resource manual will facilitate the endeavour of assessing cultural biases, understanding the worldview of First Nations clients as individuals and as members of a particular ethnic group, and increasing awareness of cultural beliefs and traditions. Although First Nations people are a diverse group with different traditions, they do share common core

beliefs and values (France & McCormick, 1997; McCormick & France, 1995; Peavy & Li, 2003; Thomason, 1991) such as a holistic perspective and living in harmony with nature.

The Medical Services Branch of Health and Welfare Canada (1991) recognizes the need to rely on a wholistic approach when designing mental health services for First Nations people. “Traditional values, beliefs, and healing practices must be emphasized in developing mental health strategies and programming which are flexible, culturally appropriate and community based” (p. 5). When traditional healing ceremonies are integrated into current counselling practice, it strengthens the sense of social connectedness for First Nations people (LaFromboise et al., 1990; Morrissette, 1994). Therefore, inviting family, friends, and elders to join a healing circle for the client may be more appropriate than conventional one to one counselling (France & McCormick, 1997; McCormick & France, 1995). The proposed manual will offer specific suggestions such as how to collaborate with the First Nations community and how to structure the counselling sessions in culturally appropriate ways.

Project Procedures

The author aims to develop a manual to guide counsellors in integrating culturally appropriate methods into current counselling practices by including topics such as: addressing the need for counsellor awareness of cultural biases, understanding the worldview of First Nations people, assessing the client’s cultural identity, and utilizing a holistic approach. Moreover, specific suggestions will be offered to support counsellors in the process of collaborating with First Nations communities and structuring their counselling sessions in ways that are culturally appropriate. In order to develop a manual of this nature, certain steps are necessary:

1. An in-depth literature review of articles and research studies addressing culturally appropriate methodology for First Nations clientele will be developed using on-line databases available on the Campus Alberta website such as Academic Search Premier, Psych Info, and ERIC. In addition, searches for sites on the World Wide Web and personal networks will be accessed. Literature to be included will have a primary focus on cross-cultural counselling, multicultural counselling, and counselling First Nations people. Several synonyms will be acceptable for the term “First Nations people” such as indigenous people, Aboriginal people, and Native people. However, research studies will only included if the study was conducted in Canada. Research studies will be critically analyzed to ensure that the criteria for judging quality of research (credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability) have been fulfilled (Mertens, 1998).
2. A review of policy manuals and descriptions of services that are publicly offered by Canadian counselling agencies that self-identify as designed for First Nations people will be undertaken in order to discover common and divergent themes and patterns in their philosophies and methodologies.
3. Given the feminist orientation of this project and the author’s representation of a dominant group that has been historically oppressive towards First Nations people, informal First Nations consultants will be involved in the project to ensure that the emerging content is authentic (Mertens, 1998). No aggregated information will be collected from informal consultants, nor reported on, within this project.

The final product will result in a manual that identifies and describes methodologies and policies that comprise culturally appropriate counselling services for First Nations people with detailed explanations of how counsellors can integrate these methodologies into their current practices.

Potential Implications

A manual to support counsellors who are interested in systematically integrating culturally appropriate methods into their current practices will fill the void of available resources to guide counsellors in this endeavour. This will directly benefit counsellors who provide services for first Nations people. With an increased number of counsellors integrating culturally appropriate methods into their practices, there will be an increase in culturally appropriate counselling services available for First Nations people thus enhancing the level of satisfaction with the counselling experience. Moreover, First Nations people may be more inclined to access counselling services and remain engaged in the therapeutic process (Arthur & Januszkowski, 2001). As a result, First Nations people will have the opportunity to experience empowerment in the process of overcoming their challenges. Perhaps most significantly, First Nations people who have participated in various research studies may sense that their voices have finally been heard.

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