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Culturally Grounded Group Work
with Adolescent
American Indian Students

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ABSTRACT. This paper explores the socio-educational needs and re-
views the acculturation stressors that American Indian students encoun-
ter while attending school. Also described are the effects that these
stressors had on a selected group of American Indian adolescent stu-
dents attending school in a Southwestern school district. Social work
with groups is presented as a culturally grounded intervention to maxi-
mize students' efforts to achieve and maintain a certain level of bicul-
turalism. Specific findings from the case study are presented and im-
plications are shared for possible future replication of this approach.
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INTRODUCTION

American Indian Cultures: An Overview

Although majority society tends to speak about *an* American Indian cul-
ture, American Indians are a diverse population. There are 535 American
Indian tribes in the United States, each with a distinct culture. Tribal affilia-

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tion, language usage, place of residence, educational levels, acculturation status, socioeconomic status, knowledge and observance of traditional practices, and religious affiliation are some of the major factors that differentiate individuals and communities. Clearly, there is considerable uniqueness with each individual tribal group (Edwards and Edwards, 1984).

Despite this heterogeneity, American Indian people share certain core values regardless of tribal affiliation. One shared characteristic of American Indian cultures is that they traditionally have been group oriented. Throughout the life span, community members gather as a family, clan, tribe, or Nation to celebrate, gain support from each other, conduct rites and ceremonies, dance, and to have group interaction. Many of these religious and socio-cultural activities are similar across tribal and clan lines. Some of the common values shared within Nations and across tribal and clan lines are the centrality of the extended family, strong allegiance to the group, sharing, and respect for each individual regardless of age (Dykeman, Nelson, and Appleton, 1995; Greer, 1992). These values are often identified by the majority society as barriers to educational and economic success. Thus, American Indian children are confronted with contradictory messages from home/community and school/majority society. These significant contrasts between the two cultures are often ignored by the school personnel (Dupuis, 1988).

American Indian students constitute a distinct group in many schools within the U.S. They bring to their school experience unique strengths and challenges that need to be recognized by administrators, faculty members, school psychologists and social workers. All too often, Indian values are assigned low or no priority in the curriculum and in the school life in general, as well as in some all-Indian schools. Little attention is given to American Indian culture and the learning and language needs of the students (Dupuis, 1988).

American Indian Experiences and Perceptions of the U.S. Educational System

Historically, the relationship between American Indian children and the formal U.S. educational system has been viewed negatively by the American Indian communities. Dykeman, Nelson, and Appleton, (1995) described these perceptions as part of a heritage of worry and ambivalence. Missionaries and different types of governmental agencies have been involved in the education of American Indians since the 1540s. The U.S. government alone was operating schools by 1860 (Schaefer, 1998). Many of these schools were boarding schools which were administered by the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA). Many of the young American Indian children were taken forcibly from their family homes and placed in distant boarding schools (Dykeman, Nelson, and Appleton, 1995). The children were removed from their homes

for years, returning only if they were extremely ill. While in school, under the threat of punishment, they were forbidden to speak their language or to practice their customs/traditions at any time. Also, they were trained to provide manual labor and domestic services during the academic year, and were sent to Anglo homes during the summer recess to practice the skills they had learned.

The government realized that assimilation would occur more quickly if children were separated from their family, tribe and culture, and placed in boarding schools rather than day schools (O'Brien, 1989). This forced acculturation was considered abusive treatment and has caused many American Indians to be suspicious and resentful of the U.S. educational system. The serious problem American Indians have with under-enrollment in education may be due in part to the described historical relationship with the U.S. government.

In a report on the status of American Indian education, Evans (1990) stated that BIA schools have offered little more than remedial classes. With programs that have outdated teaching materials for some classes and a complete lack of materials for others, American Indian children are commonly identified by school personnel as being "at risk students." The drop out rate is at least 50% higher than that of African Americans and Latinos and nearly three times that of European Americans (Dingman, Mroczka, and Brady, 1995; Schaefer, 1998; Dupuis, 1988; Eberhard, 1989; Ruey-Lin, 1985; Coladarci, 1983). Dupuis (1988) found that the American Indian student enrollment rate at middle school and high school levels was dwindling and that there was apathy and high rates of absenteeism. In addition, Dykeman, Nelson, and Appleton (1995) established that the American Indian students' self-esteem decreased as years of schooling increased.

Some of the reasons identified by Coladarci (1983) in explaining the high American Indian drop out rates include: (1) perceptions of school rules being applied unevenly; (2) feelings that teachers did not care about them; (3) teachers not providing enough assistance; (4) cultural insensitivity or indifference from teachers, from whom they needed greater encouragement; and (5) a lack of parental support. Also, Dykeman, Nelson, and Appleton (1995) found that stereotypical beliefs held by educators tended to alienate American Indian families. Ruey-Lin (1985) wrote that the American Indian student is often perceived as lacking the required mental preparation for success in school. They are viewed as being less interested in schooling as a whole. Within the school environment, cultural differences between white teachers and American Indian students may create racial bias and discrimination that contribute to the failure of American Indian students. Dingman, Mroczka, and Brady, (1995) identified low teacher expectations and the counseling of American

Indian students towards vocational-oriented curricula as key factors contributing to this attrition.

Schools need to become more sensitive to American Indian cultures. Standardized practices need to be reexamined, e.g., maintaining the pupil as a passive learner, individualistic and competition based organization and activities (Eberhard, 1989). The mainstream American educational system is based on individualism and often discourages group interaction and collaboration. The traditional American Indian value of group centeredness cannot be integrated without re-framing the basic organizational structure of schools.

THEORETICAL APPROACH

Culturally Grounded Social Work with Groups

Following general trends in the profession, individualized social work interventions appear to be the most common method used to reach the American Indian student. However, social workers have creatively utilized group approaches to reach the American Indian client in different settings (Edwards and Edwards, 1984). Most of these efforts have taken place in treatment and health centers. Although school age children and youth may need to participate in treatment groups, there is also a need to use group work as a school drop out prevention tool.

Activity groups are especially enjoyed by Indian youths (Edwards and Edwards, 1980). The groups are helpful because they provide a forum for group members to discuss issues of mutual concern, to develop skills, and to discuss future goals and plans. Community or school project groups can be developed for Indian youth to choose their own projects. Groups that focus on increasing positive feelings about "Indianness" could also be helpful. Such a group was conducted at the University of Utah's American Indian Social Work Career Training Program in the 1980s. The feedback was that the group was successful (Edwards and Edwards, 1980).

Although group activities grounded in the culture of the children appear to be successful, it is proposed to take a step further and engage the group members in *praxis* (Freire, 1995). In a Freirian sense, students are encouraged to participate in group activities that connect them to their cultural roots and in turn they are encouraged to speak about it or to reflect about what happened and how the activity relates to their life at school and at home. This approach maximizes the potential of the students' narrative legacies and their commonalities become explicit (Marsiglia and Zorita, 1996). This culturally grounded perspective follows the identity development approach as it focuses on individuals who become strongly aware of identity issues and their oppression due to their cultural background (Garvin, 1997).

American Indian or non-Indian school social workers need to become familiar with the unique cultures the children represent and the current issues their communities are facing in order to effectively facilitate such an approach. Group facilitators need to educate themselves about historical traditions, beliefs and community norms, assess the children's level of assimilation into the dominant culture, and understand what any loss of culture may represent (Williams and Ellison, 1996). Groups can assist students in enhancing their awareness about Indian values and traditions. Resources from the culture can be creatively and respectfully used to support this process. Group members in rural and urban settings can share and support each other in their own challenges as members of the "two worlds" represented in the American Indian and the majority communities.

METHOD

Due to the nature of the phenomenon studied and the qualitative methodology used, theoretical sampling was used as the sampling technique for this research (Burgess, 1982). The field work took place in one of the schools of a Southwestern school district with a large American Indian enrollment. The group was readily available to the researchers as its members were participating in a school-based project. The group was treated as the unit of analysis while conducting the case study.

Participant observation and review of group progress notes were the central techniques utilized for the collection of data. Due to the semi-structured nature of the group sessions, other instances of school life were observed to complement the group session transcriptions. They included records from the social work supervision sessions, field notes from community meetings, and school records. Data analysis was constant during the process. Looking for patterns was the technique used to compare and sort pieces of information into categories.

FINDINGS

A Case Study

This case study presents the experience of a group of American Indian students attending a rural Southwestern elementary school district. The district served three distinct communities: a traditional farming European American community (community A); a predominantly Chicano/Mexican community (community B); and two districts of an American Indian Community/reservation (community C). Approximately 12,823 individuals live within the

boundaries of these three communities, which were experiencing rapid social and economic change. Many farmers sold their land in the last decade. Developers and new residents working in the city are filling the gap and new demands are being placed on residents and community institutions. This mobility process is accentuating existing socio-economic contrasts among and within the three communities.

Combined, the three communities served by the district are characterized by high levels of ethnic diversity. The three main ethnic groups represented are European American (42.1%), Chicano/Mexican (40%), and American Indian (16.3%). American Indians live almost exclusively (90%) in community C; Chicanos/Mexicans are evenly distributed between communities A and B; and European American residents are mostly concentrated (81.5%) in community A. It can be surmised that based on the geographic distribution and housing patterns of these groups, cross-cultural contacts are rather limited outside of the school building. Although the majority of the residents are monolingual in either English or Spanish, some of the families in these communities are bilingual. American Indian elders tend to be bilingual or monolingual in their native language.

The area served by the school district appears to be a community struggling for greater cohesiveness and identity. Diverse peoples share a common physical space without necessarily having arrived at a sense of common identity. The American Indian students, although residing in a mostly rural community, are in constant contact with city life and city ways. For example, youth gang culture was identified by a group of elders of the American Indian community as a new and growing phenomenon in the reservation (Participant observation notes from Community Task Force on Drop Out Prevention, 1996). At the time of this study, the schools were facing the challenge of serving as a safe common ground where all opinions count and all students can learn and succeed.

Description of the School District

The School District serves pre-kindergarten through eighth grade students coming from the three described communities at two schools, each serving students from Kindergarten through eighth grade (school 1 and school 2). Approximately 68% of all students enrolled in School 1 and 90% of the students enrolled in School 2 qualify for free or cost-reduced lunch. The student body, in terms of its ethnic background, is as diverse as the communities the district serves.

When the district's profile is compared to the community's profile, it is possible to infer that the district's enrollment is not proportional to the communities' ethnic breakdown. European Americans constitute 42% of the residents in the communities served by the district, and 26% of the students

enrolled in the district. Chicanos/Mexicans account for approximately 1/4 of the residents in the communities and are 1/2 of the total district enrollment. The American Indian group is the only group that comes close to being proportionally represented in the district's enrollment. The ethnic breakdown of the district's and school's staff do not mirror the student enrollment. The great majority of teachers and administrators are European American and most support staff tend to be Chicano or American Indian.

The American Indian pupils are bussed every morning from their community to the schools using non-district school buses. The "Indian buses" are not the same color as the district buses and instead of having the school district's name on each side of the bus, the company's name, "Mayflower," is written on the sides and front of the buses. The district also has an Indian Education Program housed at School 1, with two *Johnson O'Malley Indian Education Act* employees and *Title V* tutoring. Both schools have recently initiated an after school program administered by the local YMCA and by the City Parks and Recreation Department.

To develop an intervention which not only supported students and teachers, but also enhanced their ability to effectively communicate across cultural boundaries, the school board formed a partnership with the local University's School of Social Work. A social work unit with five interns and a faculty member from the university was established. The composition of the social work team was reflective of the district's ethnic composition. Group work was identified as an appropriate intervention in addressing students' needs. Several groups were formed and facilitated by the interns. This case study describes one of those groups.

Genesis of the Group

The group was formed in response to an incident involving a fatal shooting in the American Indian community. The social work interns brought the perpetrator's close friends together to process their reactions to the shooting. The primary concern of school administrators and the interns was feedback received from the teachers that some of the perpetrator's friends were extolling the incident. The shooting was interpreted by the tribal authorities as a gang related incident. The school administration supported the social work team to intervene by group process. Students remained as a group for the rest of the school year (six months).

The original six group members were American Indian males. The tribal representation included Pima, Tohono'Odam, Apache and Lakota Sioux. Three participants were eighth graders and three were seventh graders. Their average age was 13 years old. Two group members were brothers. Most of the group members resided at the nearby Indian community. Academically, the members of the group performed at different levels. Some group mem-

bers were getting passing grades and some were not. A more detailed profile of the students is included in the Practice Implications section.

Two interns, under the supervision of the local University's School of Social Work faculty member, facilitated all sessions. One facilitator was a first year MSW intern, a European American woman who had previous experience in facilitating children and youth groups. The other facilitator was a Senior year BSW intern, an American Indian woman who had previous experience in facilitating groups with people with AIDS and American Indian youth groups.

The school administration did not feel comfortable with two female interns facilitating the group alone as they perceived most of the group members as "trouble makers." The administration assigned the school psychologist, who was a European American male, to participate, observe, and monitor the sessions. The psychologist did not have any previous experience in group facilitation and attended sessions only during the group formation phase.

Purpose

The initial purpose of the group was to be short-term, crisis intervention oriented. The goal was to process the shooting that had occurred, and to identify options for members of the group to remain safe. The group met for three months and then transformed itself into a new and expanded group. Two members of the initial group were placed in an alternative school due to behavioral problems.

As in the first group, the continued purpose of the second group was to provide students with a safe place for them to explore who they were, to address issues related to their behavior and to explore how they were viewed by the teachers and staff. Modeling problem solving behavior, conflict resolution, and learning how to work together as a group were the core objectives of the group.

Formation Phase

The facilitators made clear to the members that the group was "their" group. Group norms and a contract were developed based solely on participants' feedback. Initially, members expressed some resistance about doing "serious work." One of the members explained his behavior as follows, "I just want to have fun because I will not be alive much longer."

Throughout the formation stage they "acted-out" frequently. The group was very different from the classroom. They were uncomfortable speaking about their feelings and having power. One of the facilitators, during supervi-

sion, narrated how she dealt with the students' misbehavior, "When the group members are acting-out, we talk to them about wanting to give them more power in the group and feeling frustrated that they are blowing us off and not taking the group seriously."

Group members, at the formation of the group and during the working phase, requested that "girls" be allowed into the group. Some of the young women attending the school stopped the facilitator and asked that a group be formed in which they could participate. Co-ed groups may reproduce the lower status of girls in the school environment. It has been observed that girls talk less and raise fewer questions in small co-ed groups (Hepler, 1997). To avoid these dynamics, a separate American Indian girls group was formed.

During this phase, the psychologist was in attendance at the group sessions. For the first two sessions, he sat with the group. Group members were extremely hesitant to discuss any issues openly and if they were not "acting out," they were non-participatory. The interns, along with assistance from the social work faculty member, requested that the administration reconsider the direct involvement of the psychologist in the group as it was hindering the process. The administration agreed and the psychologist sat at a desk outside the circle for the remaining sessions of the formation phase. Eventually, he stopped attending.

One of the first activities the students engaged in was deciding whether the group would continue to meet weekly. During the second group meeting, they discussed what would be the name of the group. The selection of a name was made by group members in one session and then changed in a subsequent session.

The school administration identified a meeting room for the group that was not used as a classroom. The desks were moved and chairs were placed in a circle to encourage greater interaction. At the second group meeting, introductions were made by the interns and the students. An important part of the introduction was the identification of their tribe and where they lived. With the exception of one, the group members said they were uncomfortable identifying with a specific tribe.

Working Stage

At the beginning of the working stage the group members were only communicating with the facilitators, mirroring a classroom student-teacher type of communication. When they talked to each other it was in an acting-out fashion. Later, they progressed in their intra-group communication and were able to interact more with each other without needing to go through the group facilitators first. A turning point in the members' group communication patterns occurred when they participated in a five day personal growth camp for American Indian youth. The group facilitators referred all group

members to the camp. Their experience provided them with some insight and also strengthened their friendship. Students shared their experiences with the facilitators and with each, stressing how much they enjoyed meeting other American Indian boys and girls and the adult American Indian camp leaders and elders. Becoming in touch with their rich cultural heritage and meeting cultural role models appeared to have strengthened the group members' sense of ethnic identity and their pride in their cultural heritage.

After the camp experience, the group sessions were structured around the members' concerns. Some of the discussions related to being American Indian, discrimination in the school, violence, anger management, family issues and personal responsibilities. Since all the members of the group were American Indian, the group discussions took place in an American Indian cultural context. For example, when talking about violence in the community, the group members discussed the metaphor of the *American Indian warrior*. This type of discussion clarified some misconceptions students had about being a defender of the culture. Alternatives to violence were presented and explored at the same time that the idea of pride and dignity were maintained. Based on the diverse backgrounds of the students, the facilitators agreed to take an approach which was not specific to any one tribe.

During this stage, it was difficult for the facilitators to address some issues, particularly discrimination, with appropriate alternatives because some of the blatant situations expressed made them angry. For example, some teachers were referring group members to the in-school detention room without a justified reason. Some students were spending most of their days in the detention room. The social work interns attempted different environmental interventions, such as developing a diversity training manual for new teachers and workshops on culturally grounded interventions in the classroom. These actions were discussed in group, with group members providing feedback.

The membership changed during the working stage. Two of the initial group members were removed from the school to an alternative school due to behavioral problems. The existing group members were asked to identify potential members who would find the group helpful and who would fit into the group. They discussed possible members and came to a decision. Three other members were added. The three new members fit into the group quickly. The new members told the interns that they had been told about the group by other group members. Early in this phase the psychologist left the group, although he did return to participate in the dream catcher activity. During this activity, students shared with each other those things they did not want to pass on the net of the dream catcher, things or situations they wanted to be protected from.

Closure of the Group

The facilitators prepared the group for termination at least four weeks prior to the actual date. Group members were reluctant to discuss the closure. The members expressed anxiety regarding three questions: (1) what would happen if they had a problem?; (2) would they get to have a free hour if there was not a group?; and (3) would there be a group the following year? The group members had grown to trust the facilitators. Termination of the group was equally hard for the facilitators, due to the intensity of the group interactions and relationships.

Group Outcomes

The goals of the group were attained. The students were provided with a safe place to explore who they were and to address issues related to their behavior and how they were viewed by the teachers and staff. The members were able to develop a group that met their needs. The consistent response and support of the facilitators to group members generated group member trust.

A major outcome of the group was that members had an opportunity to further develop/strengthen their cultural identity. Early in the formation of the group, members were clearly uncomfortable identifying with their tribal group. Toward the end of the group, and in part due to their participation in the youth camp, they were drawing on their tribal group identification for strength.

The process achieved several crucial goals. The group members learned that they could express their concerns without fear of reprisal. When they told of their experiences and consequent feelings of not being treated fairly in certain situations, two adults, the social work interns, validated their experiences. This support also provided members with the knowledge that if they addressed problems in a constructive manner, they could make an impact.

PRACTICE IMPLICATIONS

American Indian and non-Indian school social workers need to become familiar with the unique cultures that the students represent and the issues that their communities are facing. This case study points out how group process can be used to enhance and support American Indian values and traditions. The group members initially displayed mistrust, asking many different questions and trying to understand the concept of the group as "their" group. Adults in the school were allowing them for the first time to have a voice and make decisions about the group. Since the group was held during class time, members also appreciated the support that they had from their

teachers to miss one of their class sessions per week in order to attend the group. The students agreed to make-up any missed assignments.

The purpose of the group was to provide a safe environment and an opportunity for members to discover who they were, to explore their behavior, as well as to discuss how they were viewed by their teachers and school administrative staff. The use of culturally grounded groups and relating the group discussion to some belief/tradition of their tribes was important. Social workers who work with American Indian children must be aware of the historical political processes, cultural differences, experience of racial/cultural bias, and uniqueness of tribal communities/governments. American Indians are distinctive, not so much along racial lines, but because of their history with the United States. Tribal governments are the only group to be mentioned in the Constitution of the United States, identifying them as "sovereign powers." Both American Indian and non-American Indian social workers need to consider what they represent to the Indian communities. A process of building trust is always needed.

It is recommended that groups like the one described be gender specific for this age. For the specific group discussed in this paper, the addition of girls would have changed the group dynamics substantially and the goals of the group might not have been achieved. As mentioned earlier in the article, the shooting that served as the impetus for the group's formation was gang related. Several male group members were either members of a youth gang or wanted to be a member of a gang. If girls were added to this group, the group members would act as if they were part of a gang. Further, it would have been very difficult to talk about issues and fears facing young Indian men, or any young man for that matter, when a young woman is sitting and listening. There are other groups where the addition of young women is appropriate, but for this group it was not. The presence of the two facilitators provided the female perspective to the group.

Group work with American Indians should include culturally specific activities, including some kind of art/craft component. It appeared easier for group members to express themselves through art, and then to explain their feelings and experience to the group (praxis). Also, it is a way to track changes in the way that a group member is identifying culturally. In addition, an important concept for inclusion in such groups is spirituality–a basis for all tribal beliefs. An example of this is the visioning/dreaming activity in which the members were quiet and reflected for five minutes while listening to flute music and then painting their vision/dream on a pot. As they shared their dreams, some of the images were of the mountains on the reservations, cactus, bear paw, eagle, water, cactus fruit, grandmothers and the desert. The members saw all these images as a strong part of the vision that they held for themselves.

Group work which addresses identify formation and success in school should be structured as a support group that is on-going and has an open group membership. The group size should remain small, no more than eight, to allow for participation. If possible, there should be two facilitators, with at least one group facilitator being an American Indian. The primary criteria for facilitators is that they be open and willing to learn from group members, as well as able to share their awareness.

The involvement and support of school administration in the development and implementation of groups is critical. Equally necessary is the use of outside resources to help students when school is not in session. Finally, the sharing of food in each session is important. In tribal communities, food is what one offers to welcome and comfort others–it is custom. At each group meeting, one of the interns brought some type of snack and drink. Once group members became more comfortable, they offered suggestions on snacks. The snacks were eaten during the group sessions and were not allowed to be taken outside of the meeting room.

There were specific group activities such as making dream catchers, conducting talking circles, mask making, visioning and making dream pots, playing traditional Indian flute music and drawing, talking about the history of their tribe and burning herbs that their tribes use for healing and cleansing purposes. Although the facilitators were first concerned with the burning of herbs because they feared it might not be something that all group members would like, it was one of the activities that was requested often.

Finally, facilitators need to be aware of the emotions that blatant prejudice may awaken in them. They need to process those emotions outside the group sessions, perhaps during supervision, in order to better support the students.

This work has demonstrated that culturally grounded group work with American Indian students is a viable tool to increase pride, self-esteem, interpersonal skills, and particularly to strengthen their cultural identity. All these ultimately will assist American Indian students to remain in school and succeed personally and academically.

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Illuminating the Process
of a Rape Survivors' Support Group

Lois A. Carey

ABSTRACT. Supportive group work for women who have been victimized by the trauma of rape has been used as a therapeutic model for psychological integration, healing and recovery. To offer group members the opportunity to attain these goals, it is important that the group facilitator develop a working understanding of the impact of rape and the rich contribution that the mutual aid group modality provides in addressing members' issues and needs. This article attempts to illustrate and illuminate the effects of group treatment within distinct developmental stages of a community rape survivors' support group. *[Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-342-9678. E-mail address: getinfo@haworthpressinc.com]*

Traumatic events destroy the sustaining bonds between individual and community. Those who have survived learn that their sense of self, of worth, of humanity depends upon a feeling of connection to others. The solidarity of a group provides the strongest protection against terror and despair, and the strongest antidote to traumatic experience. Trauma isolates; the group re-creates a sense of belonging. Trauma shames and stigmatizes; the group bears witness and affirms. Trauma degrades the victim; the group exalts her. Trauma dehumanizes the victim; the group restores her humanity. (Herman, 1992)

Supportive group work for women who have been victimized by the trauma of rape has been used as a therapeutic model for psychological in-

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