

Journal of Indigenous Research

Full Circle: Returning Native Research to the People

Volume 3 | Issue 1

Article 3

September 2013

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Recommended Citation

Thomason, Timothy (2013) "Resources for Counseling Native Americans," *Journal of Indigenous Research*: Vol. 3 : Iss. 1 , Article 3.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.26077/rtjt-w539>

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/kicjir/vol3/iss1/3>

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Resources for Counseling Native Americans

Cover Page Footnote

This research project was partially supported by the Northern Arizona University College of Education Dean's Research Grant Program.

Resources for Counseling Native Americans

There are approximately four million Native Americans in the U. S., and they represent hundreds of different tribes (U. S. Bureau of the Census, 2000). The great diversity of Indian peoples complicates service delivery, since it would be quite a challenge for service providers (both Native and non-Native) to have knowledge of all Native American tribes. As a group, Native Americans experience depression, anxiety, and several other psychological disorders at a higher rate than the general population (Zahran, Kobau, Moriarty, Zack, Giles, & Lando (2004), but they underutilize mental health services relative to Whites (Greer, 2004; McCormick, 1997). This underutilization may be due to Native American clients fearing that they may be misunderstood by non-Native counselors. It is essential that counselors have a basic understanding of Native American culture and know how to conduct culturally appropriate and effective counseling with members of this population.

This study addressed the question “What resources should non-Native American counselors utilize to increase their understanding of Native Americans, particularly in the area of counseling and mental health?” Resources were divided into three categories: books; videos and movies; and other resources, such as people in local tribal communities. The opinions of a sample of both Native and non-Native American mental health professionals who work with Native American clients were collected as a way to begin answering this question and to provide a basis for further research. This study was part of a larger research project on best practices in the assessment and counseling of Native Americans (Thomason, 2012; 2011a; 2011b).

This study used open-ended questions in an internet survey in order to gain a broad perspective on the subject and allow respondents the freedom to respond in an unrestricted way. Participants were psychologists, mental health counselors, and related professionals, the majority of whom were Native American. The opinions of specialists in counseling Native Americans can provide valuable suggestions for counselors regarding how to make their counseling services for this population more culturally appropriate and effective. In addition to the survey, a literature review on counseling Native Americans was also conducted to identify the most frequently recommended books and videos for counselors, and these resources are listed below along with the survey results.

Existing Resources

There are lists of resources for general cross-cultural counseling (e.g., Web Resources, 2011) and there are lists of recommended books and movies about Native Americans (Native Appropriations, 2011; Native Languages, 2011a, b). While these lists contain some good recommendations, they are often compiled by a single individual and thus may reflect personal tastes. Several archives list organizations and other resources that deal with Native American health and mental health problems (American Indian Health, 2011; National Center, 2011; National Library, 2011; National Network, 2011; WWW Virtual Library, 2011). These resource lists are helpful but are not specific to counseling and psychology. Other lists of resources more closely related to Native American counseling, mental health, and rehabilitation can be found in Cohen (2003), NativeWeb (2011), and Thomason (1995).

Need for the Present Study

Lists of recommended books about Native Americans that are specifically suggested for counselors can be found in several books written for health professionals (Cohen, 2003; Herring, 1999; Swinomish, 1991). However, no lists of recommended videos or movies specifically for counselors or mental health professionals were found in the literature. In addition, no surveys of counselors and related professionals regarding such recommendations have been conducted previously, so the present study fills a gap in the literature. The results of this study provide lists of recommended resources for counselors based on the suggestions of a large number of Native and non-Native counselors who specialize in working with Native American clients.

Method

Participants and Procedures

The sample for this study was a non-random group of mental health professionals who work mainly with Native American clients. Participants were recruited by an e-mail invitation. Most respondents were members of the electronic mailing list of the Society of Indian Psychologists, a professional association of psychologists, counselors, and related professionals who work with Native American clients. Additional respondents were nationally recognized experts in this subject who were identified by a search of the literature and then invited to participate in the web-based survey developed by the researcher. In response to the invitation, 68 individuals completed enough of the survey to be deemed viable for the data analysis. Responses to the survey questions were collated and analyzed using mainly qualitative methods.

Participant Characteristics

Participants were 68% female, and 75% were licensed mental health providers. Many were Native American (57%), with representatives from 23 different tribes. Participants worked in a variety of occupations. Over 70% of the participants held a degree in psychology, and 73% were employed at an outpatient counseling center or mental health clinic, an inpatient clinic or hospital, or in independent practice.

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Gender	
Female	68%
Male	32%
Racial/Ethnic Self-Identification	
Native American	57%
White/Caucasian	44%
Other or more than one	13%
Occupation	
Psychologist	42%
Counselor	27%
Teacher	16%
Researcher	16%
Social Worker	10%

Other or more than one	25%
Discipline of Graduate Degree	
Psychology	70%
Counseling	13%
Social Work	13%
Other	4%

Instrument

An original researcher-created survey was used for data collection since an existing instrument with the desired content for this study was not found in the literature. The literature on counseling Native Americans (including prior surveys) was reviewed to determine the most important questions to ask on this topic. The survey draft was reviewed and pilot tested with three Native American counselors and revised based on their feedback. The created survey was named the Survey on Counseling Native American Clients and contained a total of 30 qualitative items, in the form of open-ended questions on assessment, counseling, and resources. Participants also completed a demographic questionnaire with nine questions. It was estimated that it would take about an hour to complete the survey, and participants were offered a financial stipend to take it. Due to the large number of items on the survey and the amount of data generated, only the results relevant to the topic of recommended resources for counselors will be discussed in this article. Other results from the survey are described in Thomason (2012; 2011a; 2011b).

Procedure

A review of the literature on counseling Native Americans was conducted and a list of potential survey participants was compiled. These potential participants were leaders in the field of counseling Native Americans and authors of articles on this subject. The Society of Indian Psychologists (SIP) was also contacted and permission was obtained to send an invitation to take the survey to SIP membership via the electronic mailing list. Potential participants were contacted by e-mail and invited to take the online survey. The instructions asked participants to express their opinion in response to the questions, and to write as much as they liked. The instructions stated that the survey focused on urban Native Americans rather than those who live in rural and reservation areas. A total of 68 participants took the survey; since they were not required to answer every question, a subset of participants answered each question. Responses to the open-ended questions were examined in a qualitative analysis of keywords, themes and patterns, to identify the most common responses.

Results

Recommended Books

Survey participants were asked “What book(s) would you recommend that non-Native American counselors read to better understand Native Americans?”

About one-third of the respondents (30%) recommended the book *Native American Postcolonial Psychology* by Duran & Duran (1995) and 10% recommended *Healing the Soul Wound* by Duran (2006). Several other books were mentioned by more than one respondent: *Reclaiming Indigenous Voice and Vision* (Battiste, 2000); *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous People* (Smith, 1999); Yuuyaraq;

The Way of the Human Being (Napolean, 1996); *Blackfoot Ways of Knowing* (Bastien, 2004); *Counseling the Culturally Diverse* (Sue & Sue, 2008); *God is Red: A Native View of Religion* (Deloria, 2003); and “Sherman Alexie’s books.” The following books were recommended by at least one survey respondent:

Counseling with Native American Indians and Alaska Natives (Herring, 1999)

Counseling the Inupiat Eskimo (Reimer, 1999)

A Gathering of Wisdoms: Tribal Mental Health (Swinomish, 1991)

Honoring the Medicine (Cohen, 2003)

The Red Road to Wellbriety: In the Native American Way by White Bison

Sharing Our Stories of Survival: Native Women Surviving Violence by C.A. Martell

The Sacred Pipe by J. E. Brown

The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down by A. Fadiman

Disciplined Hearts by T. D. O’Neill

The Sun Comes Down by P. Bullchild

House Made of Dawn by M. S. Momaday

Ceremony by L. Silko

Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee by D. Brown

Custer Died for Your Sins: An Indian Manifesto by V. Deloria

Behind the Trail of Broken Treaties by V. Deloria

Kill the Indian, Save the Man by W. Churchill

The Sacred Tree: Reflections on Native American Spirituality by J. Bopp

Indian Country by P. Matthieson

Pedagogy of the Oppressed by P. Freire

A People’s History of the United States by H. Zinn

Devon Miheshua’s books

Louise Erdich’s books

Father Michael Oleska’s books

Carl Hammerschlag’s books

Additional Recommended Books Identified in a Literature Search

Mental Health Care for Urban Indians (Witko, 2006)

Integrating Traditional Healing Practices into Counseling and Psychotherapy (Moodley & West, 2005)

Healing and Mental Health for Native Americans (Nebelkopf, 2004)

Counseling American Indians: An Annotated Bibliography (Tisdale & Thomason, 1999)

Coyote Medicine (Mehl-Madrona, 1997)

Counseling American Indians (French, 1997)

American Indian Life Skills Development Curriculum (LaFromboise, 1996)

Recommended Videos and Movies

Survey participants were asked “What video(s) or movie(s) would you recommend that non-Native American counselors watch to better understand Native Americans?”

The most frequently recommended movie was *Smoke Signals* (Bressler & Skinner, 1998), which was suggested by 21% of the survey respondents. Ten percent of respondents recommended *The Honour of All: The Story of Alkalai Lake* (Lucas, 1987), and several respondents suggested each of the following films: *The Red Road to Sobriety* (Rhine, 1995); *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* (George, Simoneau, Thayer, & Wolf,

2007); *The Business of Fancydancing* (Bond, Markey, Armstrong, Behear, 2002); *Dances with Wolves* (Arnold, Costner, Eberts, Kavanaugh, & Wilson, 1990); and *Thunderheart* (DeNiro, Fusco, Nozik, & Rosenthal, 1998). The following videos and movies were mentioned by at least one survey respondent:

Working with Native Americans (American Psychological Association, 2005)

Ishi the Last Yahi

Joseph Campbell and the Power of Myth with Joseph Campbell

Powwow Highway

The Trail of Tears

Dreamkeeper

In the Light of Reverence

We Shall Remain

500 Nations

At Play in the Fields of the Lord

Wiping the Tears of Seven Generations

The Canary Effect

Soldier Blue

Dance Me Outside

Rabbit Proof Fence

Peyote Road

On and Off the Rez

Older Than America

Additional Recommended Videos Identified in a Literature Search

American Indian Concepts of Health and Unwellness (Locust, 1990)

Counseling and Therapy with Native American Indians (LaFromboise, 1994)

Counseling the Native American Client (Roberts, 1990)

Innovative Approaches to Counseling Native American Indians (Martinez, 2000)

The Healing Road (Ryan, 2000)

Culture and Standardized Tests: Native American Issues and Examples (Ami, 2005)

Other Recommended Resources

Survey participants were asked “What other resources would you recommend that non-Native American counselors utilize to better understand Native Americans?” The most thoughtful responses follow:

“Become involved with a tribal community.”

“Form relationships with Natives, particularly elders.”

“Get involved with diversity groups, Society of Indian Psychologists.”

“Use a Native mentor. Participate in cultural immersion activities; take courses; get to know Native people; spend time on reservations and in urban Indian communities.”

“Attend pow-wows, Indian art markets, cultural events, conferences. Visit tribally operated museums. Read *News from Indian Country* and literature from the Native American Rights Fund and other tribal advocacy and justice groups.”

“Listen to elders. Learn about historical trauma.”

“Participate in trainings and gatherings; form relationships with tribal elders.”

“Talk to Native American people, read about the problems and solutions of Native peoples, use the internet.”

- “Cultural immersion.”
- “Explore your own preconceptions and prejudices. Talk to counselors who have worked with this population.”
- “Be active in the community you serve. Actively participate at feasts, community meetings, social events.”
- “Know and socialize with members of the tribal community.”
- “Website: www.icctc.org (Indian Country Child Trauma Center).”
- “White Bison, Inc. – Don Coyhis.”
- “Take community or college courses in Native American issues, politics, and anthropology. Visit Native cultural centers and museum exhibits; view movies/videos about Native American culture. Attend Native American cultural events open to the public. Attend cultural competency courses from tribal organizations.”
- “Meet with Natives, tribal elders, and respected figures in the particular Native community.”
- “Take Native American history courses and spend time with Native Americans.”
- “Meet with a Native spiritual leader to learn about the local culture; get involved with the Native center in an urban area.”
- “Attend conferences on how to counsel Native American clients.”
- “Read the research and talk to Native American counselors.”
- “Spend time with Native Elders.”
- “Get into the community; be visible and sincere.”
- “Seek competent and responsive supervision.”

Conclusion

Survey respondents identified 33 books and 25 movies that they would recommend to counselors who wish to improve their understanding of Native American culture. A review of the literature identified another 12 books and videos specifically recommended for counselors to increase their cultural sensitivity and awareness of Native culture. In addition, the survey respondents identified a wide variety of other ways that counselors can increase their awareness, such as becoming involved with local tribal communities and building relationships with Indian people. Counselors could also seek internships, field placements, and other opportunities to work with Native clients in both urban and rural settings. These are all valuable suggestions, and counselors could improve their effectiveness with Native American clients by following them.

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