Whenever possible it is preferable for First Nations clients to work with First Nations resource people. Sometimes this is not possible. A psychologist who is not Native would do well to suggest secondary resources such as the community wide healing groups available on many reserves, sweat lodges, Native women’s sweet grass ceremonies, and Native Friendship centres. It is, however, important for therapists to bear in mind that some Native women have been violated by their Native partners, relatives and/or even Native elders; in which case they may feel safer outside their Native communities. Such clients who have faced double oppression and multiple betrayals must be treated with added sensitivity, patience, nurturing and support.

While I am not Native, I have had the opportunity to consult with a number of individuals who are Native. I have done my utmost to incorporate Native history and
Native processes when facilitating their healing and empowerment. I have also made every effort to include in sessions with First Nations clients, my understanding of the role of the internalized psychological oppression suffered by all populations that are not part of the dominant, white, North American, male, traditional mainstream.

First and foremost, it is critical to understand the extent and depth of the racism experienced historically and currently by First Nations peoples. Centuries of domination by whites, together with Christianization and the systematic indoctrination as well as abuse of Native children in residential schools has led to profound humiliation, disentitlement and, for a disproportionate number of Natives, severe problems in establishing functional relationships, gaining and maintaining meaningful employment and overcoming the debilitating impact of troubled memories. The chairman of Canada’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Justice Murray Sinclair, has gone so far as to state that Canada’s treatment of aboriginal children meets the United Nations definition of “an act of genocide”.
The native peoples of Canada have suffered generations of extermination through assimilation and brutality. This horrific legacy has been exacerbated by the violence and continuing cycle of abuse often experienced within Native communities. Therapists must know the extent of the “buckskin curtain of indifference, ignorance and, all too often, plain bigotry” (Cardinal, 1999).

In a first session with Native clients, I draw out their own views about how systemic oppression has affected them. I take great care to impart that I do not view myself as an “expert”, and that I will discourage them from treating me as an “expert,” nor will I diminish them in any way by regarding them as passive recipients of my expertise. Rather I will facilitate a dialogue in which they arrive

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With all clients, there is discussion and decisions as to whether we both (or “all” in the case of couple and family counselling) sense there is a good match between the services I offer, and the clients’ needs, desires and expectations. I state my beliefs that guide me as a person and a therapist.

- I consider that all the emotional turmoil and difficulties that we experience in living have both internal and external causes. Often we have incorrectly blamed ourselves for events that are, in fact, a result of external factors such as bullying in the workplace, family of origin dysfunction, trauma, or systemic oppression such as racism, sexism, classism, ageism and other divisive ‘isms’. At other times we have failed to consider our own contribution to the problems that repetitively challenge us.

- I also indicate that the process we will engage in will involve re-evaluating what created the problems we are currently facing so as to increase the accuracy and clarity of the causes of our difficulties. This, in turn, will increase the effectiveness of our ability to restore choice where we have felt we had no choice, and to reclaim our power where a sense of powerlessness has set in.

Counselling that is entirely verbal and analytic might be unhelpful to some Native clients, and it may be necessary to pay more attention to nonverbal communication, to use art therapy, imagery and metaphor, somatic experiencing, gestalt therapy, focusing, EMDR, EFT, and biofeedback in addition to insight-oriented therapies.

As in working with all severe trauma clients, the psychologist must teach Native clients two sets of emotional self-care skills:

1) Emotionally expressive skills that access intense grief, fear, rage enabling the client to release and transform these safely

2) Emotional regulation skills that assist in calming, centering, and regaining equilibrium when conditions are not conducive to catharsis.
Clients must also be assisted to develop their intuition and follow a set of guidelines about when to express and when to control their feelings. Finally, Native clients must be encouraged to develop a sense of entitlement, self-confidence, boundary setting skills and, when appropriate, political organizing skills so as to demand respect, equality and justice as they go forward to replace the exploitation, poverty and injustice they have been subjected to all too frequently in the past.

It is critical that the non-Native psychologist be hyper-vigilant about any interaction or intervention that could be experienced by a Native client as condescending or intrusive. Therapists must avoid inflicting further injury through any inadvertent betrayal of trust, overlooking the political roots of the clients’ current reality, or failing to take into consideration cherished native values and ways of being that may clash with white European/North American ways of living. The task is to draw on both Native and non-Native frames of reference, freeing the imprisoned or damaged self of Native clients and strengthening all that contributes to their emotional, financial and spiritual resilience. To this end, seeking regular feedback and encouraging clients to speak up when uncomfortable with a particular technique or particular response is essential. Care must be exercised by the therapist to ensure that Native clients are not merely accommodating a suggestion that is not a fit. More important than any attachment to particular paradigms, techniques, or approaches is the flexibility to adapt to Native values and processes and to the validation of the particular client’s needs in each given moment.

The cumulative effect of generations of oppression is a loss of identity. This is a form of identity theft that must be dealt with. Reclaiming the self, one’s own authority, and one’s connectedness to and trust in one’s own inner wisdom is as important as any of the more specific goals and objectives the Native client brings to the consultation process. Sometimes it is the feeling of being genuinely cared for that has the greatest impact with survivors of psychological oppression. One former client touchingly stated when terminating therapy: “I have waited 45 years to hear another express outrage at how I was treated”. The client, of course, had to deal with her own hurt and rage. The support she felt at knowing another felt outrage on her behalf was the ingredient that created the felt safety that allowed her own repressed feelings to surface with a greater intensity than ever before. Any therapist working with a Native population must be prepared to share the deepest recesses of the client’s pain. It requires considerable skill and empathy to create the conditions that allow that pain to surface in its full intensity. There must be no felt pressure to face feelings that could be overwhelming, only permission and support when they emerge.

Ritual plays an important role in Native culture and making room for it in the therapeutic process can be experienced as an honouring of Native practices. Inviting a client to share aspects of her/his Nation’s traditions, history, and rituals can assist in the process of creating appropriate healing and completion rituals.

Therapists working with a Native population would do well to consider expanding their role by joining with the many advocates demanding justice for Canada’s Aboriginal Peoples. Only significant political advances, marked improvements in Aboriginal living conditions, and shifting the persisting discriminatory attitudes of all too many Canadians will reduce the psychological trauma experienced by future generations of First Nations citizens.

References