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## Career Counselling and Native Clients

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### Introduction

In this brief paper, I will identify what seem to me to be essential considerations when counselling with Natives<sup>1</sup> in relation to career development and counselling. In order to sensibly discuss career development and counselling in relation to Native clients, it is necessary to state four contextual conditions, although the brevity of this paper does not permit me to adequately explain them. The data<sup>a</sup> sources for my assertion of these contextual conditions are three-fold: 1) empirical research done by myself and my co-researchers (MacNeill, 1994; Peavy, 1994) on Native participation in counselling services in British Columbia and the Yukon, 2) study of relevant literature on career development and counselling for Natives, and 3) friendship and direct career counselling experience with Natives including Northern Utes, Klamath, Warm Springs, Coast Salish, Haida, Gitsan, Cree and others over a period of four decades.

Condition 1. There is no generic Native or 'Indian'. The term 'Indian' is a 'white' term. For Natives living traditional lives there are many important clan, band, and tribal differences as well as complicated family politics--all of which have an influence on what passes as 'career development' for individual Natives and how career counselling may be approached. Native populations are generally on the increase and they represent great diversity. For example, in one school district which we recently studied, Native students represented <sup>15</sup>~~52~~ distinct Bands. Not only do

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<sup>1</sup> I take the terms, 'Indian', 'Native', 'Aboriginal', 'First Nations' and 'Indigenous' to be generally interchangeable. For consistency, I use the term 'Native' in this paper without prejudice to other terms.

Native youth and adults have unique relationships to the dominant culture, they also have distinct relationships with their own tribal culture. Career counselling with Native clients requires an unusually large range of cultural understandings and diversity.

Condition 2. With respect to the interaction of traditional Native culture and dominant society culture, there are four Native 'cultural-self' definitions: traditional, assimilated, transitional, and bi-cultural<sup>2</sup>. A 'traditional' Native supports and lives the traditional way of life through use of foods, medicines, social organization, ceremonies and communication and is happy with this way of life.

An 'assimilated' Native supports and lives the modern, dominant society way of life through use of foods, social organization, and communication and is happy with this style of life.

'Transitional' refers to a Native person who fluctuates between traditional and dominant society and dysfunctional ways of living. The transitional person is not committed to either traditional or dominant society ways of living and may be unhappy, uncertain, unaware of own lifestyle, and often is abusive, substance addicted and manifests low self-esteem and lack of identity.

A 'bi-cultural' Native person lives and supports both traditional and dominant society ways of living. This person uses both traditional and dominant society food, medicine, clan and nuclear family. Such a person, in contrast to the transitional person, has reconciled cultural differences and is at peace with this way of living.

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<sup>2</sup> I am indebted to Wedlidi Speck for these distinctions. Wedlidi Speck is a status Indian and member of the Nimpkish Band of the Kwakiutl agency. Wedlidi is a traditional-based counsellor and specialist in cross-cultural training and counselling.

← Career counselling, to be at all effective, must take these differing lifestyles into account. Communication and protocol differ markedly, depending upon the cultural lifestyle, ~~lived by Native clients.~~

Condition 3. Career development for Native youth is seriously impeded by two characteristics of dominant society schools<sup>3</sup>. The first is the lack of attention, understanding and respect on the part of school personnel (including career counsellors) toward the linguistic and cultural identities of Native students.

The second is the lack of structural support or 'Native cultural presence' provided to students for retaining and elevating Native cultural identity. A counselling preoccupation with the **self** of Native students as a step toward career development is all too often, in the case of Native students, assimilative. Dominant society school goals imply dominant cultural hegemony and play a significant part in the subjugation, marginalization, and eventual assimilation of Natives into dominant society; and often contribute to the creation of transitional, dysfunctional lifestyles (Ryan, 1989). Albeit unintentional, career counsellors perform a kind of role occupation (Madsen, 1990) or colonization of the Native mind when they attribute importance and value to academic, social and vocational values and tasks **as they understand them.**

If career counsellors proceed in career counselling with Native

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<sup>3</sup> 'Dominant society school' is defined as the principal means by which the dominant culture and its political, economic, and social values and constraints shape the total learning environment for students despite their own primary cultural membership. Such '~~main~~-stream' schooling is a form of "symbolic political control, social domination, and cultural hegemony" (Madsen, 1990). While some 'other-cultural' students are assimilated or learn to navigate the dominant school culture, one of the undesirable results is wide-spread marginalization of Native students.

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students just as they do with students who are dominant society members, then career education, development and counselling runs the risk of becoming a 'management task' designed to erase Native history and suppress Native 'ways of knowing' both of which are critical ingredients in career exploration (Cochran, 1990). For career counselling and development to make sense with Native students, ways must be found for Native students to find and use their own 'cultural voices' in career exploration and to use their own life experiences as building blocks for a hopeful future.

Condition 4. Training in multicultural counselling is very likely not an answer to sensible career counselling for Native clients. It is rapidly becoming more and more fashionable for counselling texts and training to include multicultural counselling concepts and materials. The concept of multicultural counselling is suspect when applied to Natives for at least two reasons. First, Natives are not immigrants. They and their cultures were here first. From the Native perspective, members of the dominant society constitute the major immigrant population in North America. Persons who come to North America as refugees and immigrants have an expectation, as does the dominant society, that in due time they will attain full membership in North American dominant society. Their direction is clearly assimilative and integrationist. *This contrasts absolutely with many Natives who struggle to preserve their historical, cultural identity as an 'original' people.*

To 'migrate' is to leave one culture and to re-establish oneself in another culture (Bissoondath, 1994). The concept of multicultural counselling should be replaced by 'bicultural counselling', at least in relation to Native students since quite large numbers of 'First Nations' peoples are dedicated to retaining their Native cultural identity and, in many instances, interested in developing a bicultural ability to navigate harmoniously back and forth between Native and dominant culture.

## Setting a Direction for Career Development and Counselling for Native Youth

I will identify four ways in which career work with Native youth can be constituted so as to reduce racism and dominant society suppression of Native identity and give Native youth more voice in the formulation of career conceptions which are sensible to them.

- Provide financial and <sup>Conceptual</sup>~~philosophical~~ support for educating Natives as career counsellors for Native youth. Native community leaders and elders should have a say in the composition of such training programs.
- Take steps in school programs to ensure that Native youth can receive career counselling from Native counsellors if they want it. Not all Native youth want to be identified as 'Native', however and some non-Native counsellors are quite successful in establishing credibility and rapport with Native clients and with the larger Native community.
- Restructure counsellor education programs for career counsellors to include courses in Native psychology, language, history and culture. This would assist dominant society career counsellors to better understand Native voice, culture, and identity needs. Non-Native counsellor trainees would probably gain a much better understanding of Native life and culture if they had 'immersion' experiences in the Native community and/or with the so-called 'urban Indian' lifestyle. At the very least counsellors of Native youth should have participated in Native community events and should have first-hand knowledge of the cultural protocols typical of the Native cultural members whom they serve as clients.
- Restructure and develop career counselling programs to include experiences and materials tailored to the needs of Native youth. There is a

dire need for Native youth to have exposure to suitable role models--for identity purposes and for career emulation.

- The basic process of career counselling with Natives needs revising. In contrast with formalized, self-focused counselling based on dominant society education and psychological principles, Native-appropriate counselling might, for example, employ narrative and story-telling as a central counselling procedure. The use of storied counselling (Peavy, 1992) reifies the voice and life of the storyteller rather than the voice of the dominant culture. Narratives and stories can make what is implicit in one's life explicit, thus bringing out the unique characteristics, experiences and interests. Storytelling is a good vehicle for rethinking one's 'career identity' in relation to social, political and economic realities and can help counsellors and clients find ways to reclaim identities as members of a respected cultural group; and, conversely, explore how to navigate school and dominant culture. Storytelling can empower students by tapping their potential for constructing life and identity goals without submission to dominant cultural pressures or stereotypes for career direction.

Narratives are congruent with Native cultural tradition. Narrative-based counselling allows Native clients to define career and career choice as an outcome of their own emotional, valuational, experiential and political discourse rather than the outcome of dominant society schooling and rational decision-making. Storied counselling forces career counsellors to reflect on their own stories and brings into awareness the unintentional discriminatory and oppressive stories in their own culture. The practice of storied career counselling takes seriously, "...how ideologies are lived, experienced and felt and the level of everyday life as a basis for student experience and knowledge (Giroux, 1992, p. 210).

Through storied counselling, everyday Native experience becomes a primary tool for linking tradition, community and ~~history~~<sup>culture</sup> with career. This can help students obtain a personal voice, relationship to others and to their own culture, while at the same time promote how dominant culture can be navigated, especially by means of bicultural lifestyles. Through exploration of power, language and voice it becomes possible for a career development and counselling approach for Natives to be constructed--an approach which respects cultural difference and promotes hope for bicultural navigation and career formation.

#### The Kind of Counselling Native Leaders and Parents Request

While there are no doubt differences amongst various Native groups concerning what they regard as suitable counselling for their children and youth in school, there is also remarkable unanimity which goes back decades amongst Native groups concerning the dire need for appropriate counselling and what some aspects of culturally-appropriate counselling should be like. For example, the National Indian Brotherhood presented to the Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development a landmark document<sup>4</sup> which contained clear guidelines for the provision of counselling to Native youth in Canada. While the document was primarily geared to education for Native youth, a discussion of counselling contained the following requests and observations:

- A request for counselling for Indians by Indians, both on and off reserves.
- A request that non-Native counsellors who counsel Natives have more culturally sensitive training.

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<sup>4</sup> National Indian Brotherhood (1972). Indian Control of Indian Education Ottawa: National Indian Brotherhood, 102 Bank St., K1P 5N4

- A request that it be recognized that present counselling services not only are ineffective but in some instances are contributing to the failure of Indian students in school culture.
- A request that Native para-professional counsellor-aides be provided to increase the amount of liaison with families and Band councils and generally increase the scope of counselling services.
- A request that each school with Native students in attendance should have guidance and counselling services which ensure that Native students are prepared and supported for the **challenge of living and working after leaving school.**

#### The Kind of Counselling Native Youth Want

In a recent study of Native Youth in British Columbia (Peavy, 1994) and the Yukon (MacNeill, 1994), counsellor characteristics were identified which Native Youth search for in counsellors and which contribute greatly to counsellor success when they are present and counsellor failure when they are absent. Counsellor success was defined by the extent to which the Native Youth would seek counselling from specific counsellors and would describe the counsellor as a 'safe' and helpful person. What Native youth want from counselling and counsellors includes:

- A counsellor should be like a best friend, someone who knows when to speak and when to stay quiet, someone who has been through rocky times too.<sup>5</sup>
- A counsellor should be personal but not invasive, and "be there for us when we need them but not pushy."

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<sup>5</sup> Each of these statements represents a majority opinion from the informants in our study.

- A counsellor should be safe (respect privacy and confidentiality) and must be known to be safe by the Native youth groups. "With us it tends to be one strike and you're out so far as trust is concerned." Word of betrayal travels fast through the Native community.
- A counsellor should be known in the Native community, and should know family members by name and should ask about them. "A counsellor should know us as a whole person, not just who we are in school."
- A counsellor should be easily accessible and available on a drop-in basis when we need help. It helps for a counsellor to initiate contact in a friendly, non-pushy way. A good counsellor knows the value of early contact and does not wait for students to get in trouble before showing up on the counselling scene.
- The counsellors in a school should be seriously involved in Native presence. "This means more than displaying a few posters or a token piece of Native art."
- A good counsellor helps resist racism and likes Native youth for their good points and potential and does not concentrate on the hardships, <sup>and</sup> problems <sup>which</sup> Natives face or on their worst features or their failures.
- A good counsellor is patient, accepting and humourful.
- A good counsellor is aware of the many struggles Native youth must cope with including grief, addictions, homesickness, segregation, suicide, discrimination, adoption and resulting trauma, transitions, cross band rivalries, sexual abuse, family violence, neglect, pregnancy, lack of role-models, and shame and confusion about personal and cultural identity.

- A good counsellor need not be Native (it helps) but should have accurate and non-biased knowledge about Native history, particular band protocol, and Native families.
- A good counsellor is informal, and treats Natives as having equal status to other youth and yet has high expectations for what Native youth can achieve. "We don't want to be just shoved along through school without learning, nor do we want to be segregated into special rooms or seen as having deficits. We want our counsellors to help ensure that we take the proper courses to go on to further education and to be prepared for work."
- Native students want the counsellor to be highly informed about school culture and dominant society rules and protocol and to help them learn how to navigate the school culture. One informant in our study stated: "Two things we want from a counsellor that perhaps other youth don't need or want. One is that many of us are in a healing process with our families and our community. We need to be understood in this healing process and how important it is to us. Second, for many of us, but not all, spirituality is extremely important. A counsellor needs to know something about spirituality, and needs to recognize how important it is for some of us. We have a special relationship with the land, with ancestors, with community, and with nature. To achieve harmony is more important sometimes than anything else."

#### Guidelines for Career Counsellors Serving Native Youth and Young Adults

Based on our own empirical research and on studies by Heinrich, Corbine, & Thomas (1990), and Epp (1985), guidelines which can help counsellors be more effective (perhaps 'culturally sensible' is a better term-- 'effective' is a dominant society buzzword which does not fit into well with the thinking and language of some Natives):

- move counselling out of an office, be accessible, move around the school, participate in Native community happenings, sports, events, and ceremonies
- develop a network of contacts in the Native community, especially Native persons who can serve as career role models
- practice patience, understanding and acceptance
- earn respect and trust
- contribute to a Native presence in the school and family-school meetings-- help parents gain confidence, trust and interest in what happens to their children in the school culture
- concentrate on strengths, friendship, and participation first, problems next and move very cautiously in the areas of 'personality' and feelings
- convey a 'world-view' that is holistic and respects harmony in human relations and people's relations with the environment
- respect an ethic of non-interference
- demonstrate unquestioned respect for Elders, traditional ceremonies, wisdom and knowledge, and spirituality
- try to develop career exploration activities based on doing and participation rather than being told
- develop active, friendly, informal and open relationship with Native clients
- promote cultural awareness amongst all members of the school culture, including teachers, staff, parents and students
- create Native support groups for the purpose of helping Native youth with transitions from school to school, remote community to urban school, reserve to off-reserve and from school to work experience

- be cognizant of Native communication patterns which include non-intrusive listening, story-telling, silence, reluctance to engage in feeling-talk (under some conditions), interest in sharing information about family members, conveying of respect and trust, and family decision making
- make sure that Native students receive unambiguous and adequate information about school requirements, courses needed for going on in education, and clear and accurate information about career and worklife
- do not assume that career theory and career counselling and guidance concepts and procedures which you have learned in counsellor education programs and training will be sensible when applied to Native youth. You run the risk of unwittingly subjecting Native youth to guidance experiences which have the effect of further marginalizing them and devaluing their personal and cultural identity

### Concluding Thoughts

One of the most sobering realizations one can have about career counselling with Native youth is that almost no research has been done on Native career development--we do not even know to what extent the term 'career' is culturally sensible in reference to vast numbers of Native people. Recently I and several graduate students have carried out a few Native career/life histories. While there is vastly more about Native career/life histories that I do not comprehend than there is that I do understand, I nonetheless have formed some working conceptions about the concept of career and Native clients. I will conclude this paper with a brief review of these conceptions.

First, personal and cultural identity is a critical issue for many Native youth and young adults. They are often caught in a struggle between two cultural worlds and bicultural personhood is hard come by for many, and

rejected by others. Second, the life path, to say nothing of the career path, of many Native individuals is unbelievably chaotic and unpredictable. Family deterioration, deculturation and racial discrimination produce extremely turbulent lives. Many Native individuals have no discernible career path by any stretch of the imagination. Third, the need for healing, identity formation and self-esteem building is so pressing and omnipresent for some Native clients that career counselling and educational counselling must be an integral part of a more global, holistic counselling approach which encounters and respects the 'whole' person. Fourth, psychometrically-oriented approaches to career counselling are definitely inappropriate for large numbers of Native students. As one Native leader put it to me, "We do not want you to develop 'culture-fair tests for us--we want you to **stop testing us!**"

Fifth, 'high expectations' play a very important part in many Native cultural groups. The traditional Native family depended for its survival on sharing and cooperation of all family members in necessary tasks and in the products of effort. Praise was seldom given. It was simply expected that each person would do the very best possible. There was reluctance to do something unless the probability of success was high. Appreciation was shown, not by vocalizing praise, but by asking the person to continue what he or she was already doing with the implicit expectation by all that excellence and the very best performance possible would be striven for without praise. High skill and quality products were, so to speak, their own rewards. One of the tasks of the career counsellor (and all counsellors) working with Native youth is to find ways to tap into the naturally occurring ethic of high expectations and help Native clients to move toward them in school cultures and in dominant society worklife.

When giving me her life history, one of my informants (a 29 year old Haida woman) told me, "When I think of my own life and my 'career' development I am amazed. On the one hand I am amazed that I got through my teen years without killing myself or losing myself permanently to drinking and rough living. When I was drinking I was the life of the party. When I was sober, I saw myself as the 'ugly little Indian'. I didn't even think of myself as a girl...I was a 'no one'. I was so ashamed of how I looked and how others told me I looked. All through grade 10 I wore a big coat to school and kept it on all of the time so that no one could see how I looked. I can hardly believe that I am finally getting over my long-time image of myself as an 'ugly Indian' who was characterized by so many others (and at times, by myself) as stupid, worthless and incapable".

"On the other hand there have been some: --my auntie, my French teacher, my husband, and good friends--who have seen something in me, and have seen me as a person who had value and ability and who held up a higher expectation of me. A good friend once told me I should always try to speak from the heart. Now I have discovered where my heart is and I believe that I am thinking, feeling and living more from it than I was earlier in my life. I don't think that the idea of a career means anything to me. For the moment I just want to keep learning and growing".

At the end of our conversation, I asked her about any experiences with counsellors which she remembered. A smile crossed her face and she said, "I remember one day when I was in grade 10, I was called to the counsellor's office. The counsellor asked me if I was planning on going to University. Of course I didn't know so I said, "I don't know". The counsellor's reply was, "Well, don't worry about it, preparing for University is really hard--you should take general studies". This informant is now enrolled in the

Administration of Aboriginal Governments program at a University. In her words, "I'm slowly coming around".

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