



In teaching in a social work/counselling program at Nunavut Arctic College, it had become clear that information was needed about traditional counselling strategies and the fit between traditional helping and modern counselling. Inuit traditional worldview has been a pragmatic and empirical one, in which, as one elder says, “We were always looking for better ways.” Inuit want to provide effective services by including the best methods from both cultures: the Bathurst Mandate, which outlines the principles on which Nunavut Government is founded, specifies that action towards healthy communities be “based on the best of both modern knowledge and traditional ways.” The purpose of the research on which this presentation is based was to identify the traditional ways and the best modern knowledge, in order to understand if and how the two could be used together to provide effective helping.

Grounded theory was used to analyze extensive interviews with 26 elders who had contributed to a comprehensive series on traditional knowledge. While the interviews covered a wide range of topics, the analysis centred on identifying the essential values and strategies underlying helping in traditional Inuit culture. Five younger Inuit, all with experience of counselling and knowledge of traditional life, were also interviewed as to what had been helpful and unhelpful in their experiences.

A similar analysis was used to identify the essential values and elements of effective Western counselling (both conventional and multicultural), using texts by primary and secondary theorists as well as counsellor-training texts.

Finally, Inuit and Western findings were compared.

All helping practices are based on a foundation of worldview, beliefs about human nature, and values. Analysis showed that Inuit were traditionally pragmatic, adaptive, future-oriented and dynamic, with knowledge and action assessed as to their usefulness to survival and daily life, and new ideas and technology adapted or adopted if they had the potential to make life more liveable. Knowledge was built on an empirical, rational/cognitive foundation: one observed, experimented, reflected on experience and the experience of others, and drew one’s own conclusions. “I can only speak for myself. I can only know what I have experienced myself,” the elders say. Individuals were seen as individuals, and personal context and personal responsibility were seen as important. Non-interference with and non-judgment of others were basic principles, except in cases where an individual was a serious threat to others. Positive decisions and actions were the result of careful thought and analysis, especially assessment of consequences. That which could not be changed was to be accepted – a change of thoughts and attitude and expectations was necessary, in order to change negative emotions and behaviours.

From those foundations arose helping practices, and what emerged in the analysis and comparison of helping values and strategies was that the traditional helping approach and modern counselling indeed fit together well. Both share the same basic values, relationship factors, process components and range of intervention options.

Values of both are based on respect for the individual's context and circumstances, on each person's right to confidentiality, and on each person's right to make their own decisions and take responsibility for their own lives. The elders stressed that each person is different; that a person should not be judged; that a person is given advice but can choose what he or she will do, taking responsibility for his or her own life; and that positive change is possible. These are also the values underlying modern counselling.

Both traditionally and in modern counselling, the crucial element in effective helping is the relationship between the helper and the person seeking help. And in both, this relationship is built on the individual's perception that the helper welcomes them, is able and willing to help, can be trusted, and accepts them as they are.

Both traditional and modern helping have a similar process, which involves gathering sufficient information for understanding of circumstances, feelings, and perceptions; ways of demonstrating understanding; the setting of desired and realistic goals according to the client's needs; and ideas that may enable the client to reach the goals.

In both traditional and modern counselling, the directives and suggestions – which elders call advice – are oriented to that goal attainment. Helpers should explain why a strategy might be useful or positive, but clients are given the opportunity to decide if such ideas make sense in their own context and if they are willing to follow through.

Interventions both traditionally and today are chosen from a range of options...affective, behavioural, and cognitive, depending on client needs. Both traditional and modern counselling recognizes that mind, body and emotions are interrelated...changes in one area have effects on the others.

Traditionally, thoughts were seen to be most powerful, and clear thinking was valued. Thinking/analysing/reasoning and cognitive strategies were of primary importance. Modern counselling research has found cognitive and cognitive-behavioural interventions are perhaps the most effective, and has developed a wide range of cognitive & cognitive-behavioural strategies. These seem a particularly appropriate fit with the traditional emphasis on analysis and the power of thoughts.

Observations and practice were important elements of learning in Inuit society. Modern counselling has a variety of structured behavioural and cognitive-behavioural strategies. Suggestions for new behaviour, clear demonstrations, and opportunities for practice fit well with cultural tradition.

Inuit traditional life was future-oriented and problem-solving oriented. As noted, Inuit believed it was necessary to understand and accept that some things cannot be changed. The past is one element that is unchangeable. Modern approaches that provide problem-solving strategies which will lead to change in the present and future may be more useful than past-oriented approaches.

Expression of feelings was considered crucial traditionally: if you allow negative feelings to build up, elders say, they become overwhelming and lead to more problems. Modern affective strategies oriented to feelings, esteem, etc. thus fit with past practice. “Talk therapy” such as sharing one’s experiences and feelings in healing circles, is already in extensive use in Inuit communities.

The research identified components of effective counselling both old and new, and demonstrated that traditional and modern indeed fit together well. But although the academic study was submitted to the Nunavut Research Centre and to the Department of Health and Social Services, it was of little practical use to community members or those working in the field. The ultimate intent of the research was to present the findings to communities in a way that could be applied in practice.

To that end, the Ajuungniq Centre of the National Aboriginal Health Organization is preparing a basic counselling manual, to be distributed to Inuit communities. The manual incorporates traditional practices, building on them with specific related modern knowledge and strategies.

The manual is introduced with a summary of both traditional and modern helping values and strategies. The requirements of each stage of the helping process are then outlined – building a relationship, gathering information, setting goals, action towards goals, and evaluation and follow-up. Each section begins with an explanation of traditional practice, supported by quotes from the Elders. Relevant strategies drawn from the wide range of modern counselling approaches are then explained, supplemented by examples relevant to and drawn from Inuit experience.

The section on interviewing and information-gathering, for example, begins with:

*The Elders say that it was very important to understand what was happening and why it was happening. Good advice that would lead to positive change could only be given if the situation was clearly understood. As Akisu Joamie, in discussing the counselling of offenders, says, “Of course in each case we have to clearly understand the facts and circumstances in order to be effective.”*

The importance of this clear understanding is then discussed, including the fact that good questions also help the client understand his or her situation better. This point is again emphasized with a quote from an Elder:

*Lucassie Nutaraaluk explains why it is important to ask direct focused questions: “As soon as I started being very blunt and asked focused questions, the person started responding to me...It made him rational, made him calm down and think about what he was doing.”*

The manual then goes on to explain the different types of questioning that have been specifically identified in modern counselling – open and closed questions, for example – with explanations and examples of their advantages and disadvantages.

Each section thus combines the knowledge and understanding of the past with knowledge and new skills developed in the present.

Language is an important issue. English is the second language in most Inuit communities, and people also have varying levels of use and comprehension. Professional jargon can be meaningless even to English speakers. Plain English is therefore used throughout the manual and all other information we send to communities. The intent is that as well as providing a manual in plain English, which will facilitate understanding of concepts, it is hoped that an Inuktitut version will also be possible. But translators cannot be expected to have professional knowledge of a topic: accurate translation therefore depends on an English version in which concepts are clearly explained in clear language. This also means that attention must be paid to the use of idioms. “Down in the dumps” for example is an emotion phrase in English. But it cannot be assumed that an Inuktitut-speaker would understand its meaning. Idiomatic language can lead to meaningless and confusing literal translations.

A plain-language glossary of counselling terms will also be included. Although the manual itself refrains from using professional jargon, counsellors in communities need to understand such terms, for they will encounter them in other resource materials. “Empathy,” for example, is a standard counselling term, yet even the average English speaker may not accurately understand its meaning. The glossary will therefore provide explanations of common terms encountered in counselling materials. The manual also includes an annotated reference section of such counselling resources, including websites, videos and printed materials.

We feel it is necessary to keep in mind that there are essentially two main audiences for the results of counselling research. One audience is the formal or informal counsellor – those people who want and need to learn a variety of concepts and skills in order to do their work effectively. Although academics and researchers may focus on the “oral tradition” of Inuit, it is a fact that few of us can learn and retain large or detailed amounts of material just by hearing and limited discussion. Access to knowledge in writing makes it possible to check information repeatedly, go back to certain sections, reflect on what one reads. Inuit too want access to learning materials – a study by Pauktuutit on the needs of Inuit counsellors emphasized the need for resources that would help workers expand their skills and knowledge. That is the purpose of a written skills manual to which counsellors can refer as needed.

The second audience is the community at large – those people who have a general and less focused interest. The Ajunnginiq Centre is in the process of developing a series of radio ‘soap operas’ centering on coping skills. In these short radio plays, we will be able to incorporate examples of traditional values and practice, as well as general information about more effective emotions, thoughts and behaviours. The action strategies used in counselling can be learned outside the counselling relationship and used in families, with friends, on the job. Information about such basic problem-solving and interpersonal skills can most effectively be shared with the widest audience through radio.

The north is increasingly wired to the Internet, with government-employed counsellors having access although home computers are yet unavailable to many. The Ajuunginiq Centre has a website through which we are able to disseminate information related to all areas of health. Again, a series of plain-language brief guidelines of helpful communication skills and other coping strategies, tied to traditional values and practices, will be developed for the website.

Similar skill and information guidelines will be developed as plain-English and Inuktitut pamphlets, for distribution in communities.

The Government of Nunavut's Standing Committee on Culture, Education and Health stated that, "Members want to see mental health workers incorporating both ...a good knowledge of Inuit language and culture, with a specialized knowledge of mental health skills." This counselling manual and its offshoots are one effort towards that goal, bringing research back to the community in a form that is useful and accessible.