

Natives caught in time of rapid change

by Ernest J. Turner

Director, Alaska Native
Alcoholism Recovery Center

Editor's note: This is the sixth in a series of articles based on a thesis, "A Cultural-Relevant Curriculum in the Education of Alcohol and Drug Abuse Counselors Working with Alaska Natives," by Ernest J. Turner. Turner, an Athabascan from Holy Cross, is the director of the Alaska Native Alcoholism Recovery Center in Anchorage.

Den Nena Henash Our Land Speaks

OPINION

Counseling

Essential to the attainment of curriculum development is a need to understand the problem and the people who are being served. If a desire exists to enhance a center's ability to provide care, then a major importance must be placed on the skills, needs and values of the people within the organization. Since the core of the program is usually comprised of counselors, its success or failure is determined by the performance, values and expertise of the counselors.

My experience in counseling has taught me to be flexible when trying to work strictly within the parameters of any conventional approach. I discovered that it is extremely important to take into account the distinctiveness of the individual client, in relation to the social/cultural aspects of the person, if appropriate services and care are to be provided.

Counseling is probably the most important part of the alcoholism-treatment program. It is described as a professional problem-solving process. It is a continuous series of interdependent actions or events leading toward a particular result.

The process is dependent on a trusting relationship and the counselor's knowledge of human behavior. Likewise, the values and demeanor of the counselor are important in the relationship. Each counselor brings his or her own unique personal characteristics to the counseling process.

The alcoholic counselor in recovery can represent a role-model philosophy for the agency, while a Native counselor can bring a natural, creative style, drawing on the richness of the culture. Both styles could be effective in helping clients explore their own commitment to recovery.

My work, both in Native and non-Native agencies during the past 19 years, has led me to believe that society in general has an institutionalized opinion concerning Alaska Natives and that there is a social distance between Western society and the Native cultures.

Consequently, the effectiveness of a non-Native counselor working with Native clients, who are believed to have socially unacceptable values, is not conducive to an appropriate setting for treatment. This is only one aspect of the counselor/client relationship, but when such a heavy social stigma is associated with the Indian problem, the social-distance factor cannot be ignored.

The client, having become accustomed to the social distance, can easily sense rejection by the counselor. Thus, the client is often referred to by the counselor as being "hostile," "unmotivated" and hard to reach.

Part of this may be due to the "alcoholic's" disturbed condition; however, the client's reaction to a counselor is highly dependent on the counselor's ability to demonstrate cultural acceptance.

An important quality essential to closing the social distance is unconditional positive respect. The counselors may not feel a strong liking for every client, but they must maintain a positive feeling for each client as a worthwhile human being, in spite of unlikeable traits. A part of this is acceptance of the client's value system as being valid for the client.

This does not mean that the counselor has to agree with everything the client says or does, but the counselor must accept the client as an individual with his or her own experiences, personality and principles.

The counselor has a set of values and beliefs which influence behavior, and each individual client has a set of values and beliefs which probably differ from the counselor's. It is crucial for the counselor to recognize and understand the client's culture and not label it as being good or bad. However, the counselor does not have to condone anti-social or destructive behavior.

Taking this process one step further, I found out what the ANARC counselors' views are concerning cultural identity and spiritual perception and intend to use these views in developing a plan for the cultural-relevant curriculum. In a brainstorming session recently, the ANARC staff brought up some interesting issues on cultural conflicts. Some are:

- Society has brought us to a strange world with all of its push-button

gadgets and with all of its different demands and expectations.

- As Alaska Natives we are caught in a time of rapid cultural change, not by choice, but for survival.

- In our transition, we have developed many problems.

- Some of us find it very difficult in our transition to make adjustments to different lifestyles within the family structure, in employment, education and our traditional beliefs.

- We desire certain things from both cultures which causes an internal conflict.

- We need to focus on our conflicting values and develop our own personal identity.

The counseling staff generally agreed that a tragically low self-esteem and a sense of incompetence resulting from a feeling of racial inferiority imposed by the dominant society was a significant problem.

They also talked of the difficulty in adjusting to the demands of society, which is seen as both segregated, yet requiring assimilation. Some of the other conflicts associated with a different value system as seen by the staff are:

- Traditional — Unity and cooperation, harmony with nature, extended families, environmental education, spiritual conviction, Native language, Native food, ceremonial Native dances.

- Non-traditional — Competition, mastery over nature, nuclear families, academic education, church, English language, Big Macs, rock'n'roll.

These are but a few of the areas of conflict. However, in all fairness, not all staff experienced all of the conflicts. Some insisted they had become

*It is impossible
for clients to
recover unless
they feel good
about themselves
as persons. . .*

acculturated and were comfortable with their current situation.

We realize the inability of some people to adjust beyond transpersonal experiences is often aggravated by an unfriendly environment, and sometimes they become absorbed in a world of myths and feel unable to communicate their experiences.

Given this, the principle method of formulating conceptual models to incorporate into the curriculum should be based on the client's situation.

It is impossible for clients to recover unless they feel good about themselves as persons, unless they have some models to follow, unless they have community support and unless their values and beliefs are considered in the recovery process.

Much more work needs to take place before we can develop an adequate approach based on these experiments. However, it does not seem inconsistent with the forces of traditional culture to encourage ourselves to achieve once again a balanced relationship between ourselves and the environment.

Alaska is still an area of great scenic beauty, where the souls of our ancestors roam. We must not disappoint them.