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Holistic Arts-Based Group Methods with Aboriginal Women

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Abstract

The co-authors discuss their experiences of developing and facilitating an eight-week holistic arts-based group for a small group of Aboriginal women. The literature in spirituality and social work includes some written work that examines the convergences between Aboriginal cultural/spiritual perspectives and spirituality and social work but this could be expanded on. To this end, we describe the use of holistic arts-based methods with Aboriginal women, provide a brief description of the group, and explore how spirituality was evident in the arts-based and experiential methods. We also discuss some of the issues that arose in the process of establishing and facilitating the group including challenges related to group composition; the relevance of process; and attrition from the group.

Introduction

This paper's discussion is based on the co-authors' experiences of planning and facilitating an eight-week holistic arts-based group for a small group of Aboriginal women living in an urban community in northeastern Ontario, Canada². Our idea was to offer a holistic arts-based group to Aboriginal women in order to explore the intersections of a spiritually-sensitive social work practice and Aboriginal practices and viewpoints. While the social work literature includes some written work concerning Aboriginal worldviews, theory, and practices (Nabigon & Mawhiney, 1996; Baskin, 2002; Fire, 2006) more exploration in this area could help to broaden social work knowledge and practice, especially holistic social work methods, with regards to diversity and culture/spirituality. As Gray, Coates and Hetherington (2007) point out, most social workers do not take Aboriginal perspectives into consideration because they are more inclined to depend on the cross-cultural or anti-oppressive practice literature when seeking answers related to diversity issues. In this paper we add our experiences and thoughts to the discussions concerning holistic social work practices and Aboriginal practices and perspectives.

The focus of this paper is to discuss the potential usefulness of holistic arts-based group methods with Aboriginal participants, to provide a brief description of our group, and to explore how spirituality was incorporated and evident in the arts-based and experiential methods. We also discuss some of the issues that arose in the process of establishing and facilitating the group including challenges related to group composition; the relevance of process; the nature of the

arts-based group; and attrition from the group - issues that can also be linked with Aboriginal cultures/spirituality.

Holistic Arts-Based Methods

There is burgeoning interest within the helping/health literature in creative and expressive arts methods. These practices have been found to be useful in helping trauma survivors (Carey, 2006); in assisting with the development of self-esteem, increased socialization and improved psychosocial functioning (Torkelson Lynch & Chosa, 1996); in fostering the development of self-awareness, self-expression, and group cohesion (Synder, 2008; Newsome, Henderson & Veach, 2005); and in enhancing psychological well-being (Puig, Lee, Goodwin & Sherrard, 2006). This literature explains how creative arts allow for the expression of feelings, thoughts, and behaviours that otherwise would remain unexpressed or difficult to access/understand (Darley & Heath, 2008). We were interested in exploring how these methods might be useful to assist a group of Aboriginal women to improve their self-awareness and self-esteem especially given their experiences of oppression related to ongoing processes of colonization. The significant losses of language, culture, and traditional roles and responsibilities that are the direct impact of ongoing colonization have contributed to Aboriginal women experiencing higher levels of abuse and violence in their lives resulting in impacts to self-esteem (Dieter & Otway, 2001; Larocque, 1995; Herbert & McCannell, 1997). The negative impacts also have the potential to be transmitted intergenerationally through their family and children (Duran & Duran, 1995; Hardy, Apaquash & Butcher, 2000; Kelm, 1999). The links between developing one's self-awareness and improving self-esteem are evident in the helping literature. As Sadao and Walker (2002) state, self-esteem is closely tied to knowing oneself and one's capabilities [see also Coholic, Loughheed & LeBreton (2009) for this discussion].

While there is very little written research that reports specifically on the use of creative arts group work with Aboriginal participants [see Dufrene (1990) for one exception], Herring (1997) argues that creative arts are interconnected with Native spiritual and humanistic value systems and perspectives. There is also written literature that discusses the importance of art, symbols, rituals and other spiritually-sensitive and creative methods for Aboriginal peoples. For example, many Aboriginal people use story telling as a way of sharing cultural teachings (Struthers, 2003). In Cape Dorset, Nunavut, visualization was used in a community healing team to help heal survivors of residential school trauma (Kingwatsiaq, Novaliingo Pii & Kumaarjuk, 2003). In the United States, Pueblo Native tribes in the Southwest report how the Grandmothers and Grandfathers can bring the past alive for the new generation through tales depicted with clay figures (Gibson, 2006). Another example is the use of Native story telling and art in classroom curriculum to help children understand their culture (Hoffman, Kantner, Colbert & Sims, 1991; Yazzie-Mintz, 2007). Indeed, Dufrene (1990) points out how Native Americans regard art as an integral aspect of life and not as a separate aesthetic ideal. Art and ritual expression is included in Native medicine societies such as the Iroquois Society of Mystic Animals, the Midewin of the Ojibwa, and numerous societies of Pueblos and Navajos (Tedlock & Tedlock, 1975, as cited in Dufrene, 1990). This connectedness between Aboriginal cultures/spirituality and creative arts practices alerts us to the potential relevance of arts-based methods for helping/health practice with Aboriginal peoples.

In developing the group we drew on our collective social work practice experiences; the experiences of the two Aboriginal authors with Aboriginal cultures/spirituality, which includes knowledge that has been passed down in teachings from Elders and those who have knowledge about Native cultures/spirituality; and the literature in spirituality and social work (Canda & Furman, 1999), and expressive/creative arts methods (Carey, 2006). This being a group program, the extensive group work literature was also an important foundation; for example, *Nexus, Transpersonal Approach to Groups* (France, 2002), and *Working More Creatively with Groups* (Benson, 2001) were particularly useful given the holistic nature of the group. Certainly, the benefits of group work have long been established in the mainstream literature and include cooperating towards a shared goal; learning about values through comparison with others; and alleviating isolation (Whitaker, 1975). Working in groups is not new to the Aboriginal community. For example, many Aboriginal peoples traditionally operated communally for survival purposes (Canadiana.org, 2001-2005). Today, there continue to be a variety of circles that are used for various purposes including but not limited to talking circles, healing circles, and traditional ceremonies.

There are also parallels in the longstanding use of creative activities in mainstream group practice and in the importance of creative arts for Aboriginal peoples as described earlier. Sometimes mainstream group facilitators will use a specific creative exercise to achieve a certain goal, to address a particular issue, or to help develop the group process – the use of music and writing techniques are particularly popular (McFerran-Skewes, 2004; Tilly & Caye, 2004). However, our group is different in that it is not a treatment group for a specific issue, and we did not incorporate arts-based methods to elicit specific narratives about certain life experiences (the participants were free to discuss what they wanted). Rather, we were interested in learning how arts-based methods are helpful for Aboriginal women in assisting them to develop their self-awareness and self-esteem. To this end, the group utilized a myriad of arts-based and experiential methods that created novel experiences and an environment within which participants were encouraged to explore their viewpoints, feelings, and behaviors in order to develop their self-awareness. These methods included making dream collages, learning to meditate and use guided imagery, drawing, and stream of consciousness writing. There are many sources that can assist one in planning creative arts activities (Carey, 2006). We used some mainstream activities adapting some of these so that spirituality was reflected and incorporated in a culturally appropriate manner. Traditional Native content was also used throughout the group.

The group met once a week for eight weeks with each group session lasting two to two and a half hours long. The group was facilitated by the first author who is an Aboriginal woman from the Six Nations community. Each group session began with a brief check-in and discussion of the goals for the session. Initially, exercises were used to build group cohesion and connection, for example, decorating a clothespin so that it captures some aspect of oneself, describing the creation to the rest of the group, and attaching the clothespin to a line that hung in the group room. Importantly, the focus for the group exercises was often connected to the themes that the participants raised such as loss of identity/culture/spirituality. Exercises were also chosen to help the participants learn or improve skills such as relaxation/meditation, and cultural teachings such as the Medicine Wheel were incorporated to provide a tool for self-exploration and understanding. Nabigon and Mawhiney (1996, p.22) explain the Cree Medicine Wheel and the ‘hub’, which consists of three circles, one inside the other, representing the negative and positive

aspects of personality and how this is used for individual healing, self-exploration and understanding one's purpose (see also Nabigon, 2006). Further description of some of the group's exercises follows in the next section.

Spirituality in the arts-based group:

In general, arts-based group work may provide an excellent context for the emergence and exploration of spiritual viewpoints as it is not uncommon for connections to be made between creative/experiential methods and spirituality. For example, Rogers (1999, p.131) argues that expressive arts are a creative connection to the soul, and that a connection exists between our life force (our soul) and the essence of all beings. Also, Coholic (2005) discusses how spirituality can be an important part of arts-based group methods. In her study, group participants identified the importance of their spiritual beliefs as a way of helping them to make-meaning and sense of their life circumstances and events. They also connected meditations and mindfulness-based practices with spirituality - for some, meditation was a chance to connect with a higher power. Working with dreams was also identified as a spiritually-sensitive practice. Dreams were connected with spirituality in several ways including the belief that they contain divine messages or premonitions, or they were a way to connect with someone who had died (Coholic & LeBreton, 2007).

Similarly, in our group, the participants expressed their spiritual beliefs in exercises such as meditation and dream work, it was part of making-meaning processes, and it was felt in the connections between group participants. However, one of the differences in this group is the shared experience or common ground of spiritual beliefs that are inextricably linked with the participants' cultures. Indeed, it is well recognized amongst Aboriginal social workers that the links between spirituality and social work practice and theory are vital and make Aboriginal social work unique (Baskin, 2005; Nabigon, 2006). As a result, there was an underlying assumption in the group that spirituality is part of all of the group's exercises and processes. In fact, the participants stated that their reasons for attending the group included "to get back in touch with [their] spirit", and to "reconnect with the Creator". The expression of culture/spirituality was clear when dreams (portrayed in dream collages) were discussed. The group identified how Elders in some communities helped people to interpret their dreams and the messages of guidance they contained. Beliefs are held that dreams convey messages from ancestors, relatives and/or guides. Spiritual/cultural beliefs were also expressed in discussion of the guided imagery/meditation exercises. For example, in one meditation the participants imagined themselves soaring with an eagle. After the guided imagery, they wrote about what they had imagined. One woman discussed how many people in her family are related to the eagle and how she felt the exercise encouraged her to trust more in spiritual guidance.

Another commonality amongst the group participants and the facilitator was their shared experiences of colonization, which was displayed in the issues that were raised in the group, for example, feelings of displacement and disconnection from traditional communities, and other issues of loss related to culture and spirituality; feelings of shame and anger related to individual, familial and community experiences of abuse; substance use issues; low self-esteem; and dysfunctional relationships. Herring (1997) reminds us that some helping professionals lack understanding about the unique stresses of Native peoples such as dislocation from traditional

land bases. A simple exercise, drawing oneself as a tree, was used in one of the group sessions to explore issues of identity and self-understanding. This exercise incorporated Aboriginal beliefs that spirituality and nature are intimately connected. One participant stated that the tree exercise was her favorite one as it helped her increase her self-awareness. She came to understand that she “was not being myself for myself. I was [living my life] for other people.”

The group’s use of traditional Native content in the methods/exercises can be seen in the following examples: The facilitator had an eagle feather that was available to be used as a ‘talking stick.’ When a person is holding the eagle feather, they are respectfully listened to but it also represents a connection to the spirit world and the Creator. Another example was our use of an opening prayer, which took place at the beginning of the first group. The third author opened the group with a prayer and a cleansing ceremony often referred to as a ‘smudge’ that is used for creating a positive healing environment and to acknowledge the presence of the Creator in all the work that we do, and to ask that the work be guided by the Creator. Similarly, a ceremony was held to bring spiritual closure to the group by giving thanks to the Creator and acknowledging all that had been accomplished. This was done through a closing circle followed by a feast that was attended by the participants (including those participants who had stopped coming to the group), the authors, and the community collaborators. Cultural/spiritual teachings were also used throughout the group, for example, the Medicine Wheel teachings that can help to guide people in a holistic and balanced healing journey. In general, the women described the group activities as “eye-openers” and stated that they helped them focus on themselves and improve their self-understanding and self-esteem. For instance, one participant explained that “I am starting to believe...that I am a good person and I am somebody that people like.”

Now that we have described our group and some of its holistic exercises, next, we discuss some issues and challenges that arose in the process of forming and facilitating the group. This discussion further extends our consideration of Aboriginal cultures/spirituality within the context of providing an arts-based group. These issues include diversity amongst Aboriginal peoples, the importance of process, the purpose of the group, and attrition.

Diversity, Process, Group Purpose, and Attrition

Group formation and diversity amongst aboriginal women

The process of working in a group that pays attention to Aboriginal worldviews and spirituality reminded us very early on about the diversity that exists amongst Aboriginal communities and peoples. For example, there are eleven Aboriginal language families in Canada with at least 61 different languages (Steckley & Cummins, 2001). This diversity however, does not impede the sense of connection that many North American Aboriginal people feel for one another. Moreover, many Aboriginal people feel a sense of connection with other Indigenous people around the world.

This being said, the authors were faced with making a decision about including, or not, a non-North American Indigenous woman. We decided that for the purposes of this group that the focus would be with Aboriginal women from Aboriginal communities in Canada. We came to this decision for several reasons. First, it is important to acknowledge that Aboriginal peoples in

Canada are first and foremost the Indigenous peoples of this country. As a result they are in a unique position and face specific challenges that need a space to be acknowledged. Aboriginal women's experiences may be similar to that of Indigenous women from other countries, however, Aboriginal women in Canada are also uniquely positioned as the original peoples of this land. And in this context they have been subjected to ongoing forms of colonial violence in their own lands. Thus, it is important that spaces are available where Aboriginal women can come together to speak about the unique impact that these experiences may have on them, their family and their community. Second, we thought that attention needed to be directed to shoring up the women's cultural/spiritual identity and strengths. Aboriginal people living in urban centers (such as the group participants) sometimes have limited access to culturally/spiritually relevant services (Hardy, Apaquash & Butcher, 2000). Those who have been urban residents often find that they are estranged from their home communities. At the same time, for Aboriginal people, their extended family, friends, and members of the community constitute a natural support system and are important for a sense of belonging (McCormick & Amundson, 1997). This disconnection and lack of support is a concern especially for Native women and young parents who struggle to maintain healthy and connected family systems. Indeed, the women in the group, having lived most, if not all of their lives in an urban mainstream community, identified a need to develop their knowledge about their Aboriginal ancestry and practices. And so, while we grappled with the decision about group inclusion because it seemed at odds with a desire to be inclusive and respectful of diverse cultures, in this particular case the need to strengthen the group participants' understanding and positive connection to their culture/spirituality was deemed vitally important. As Wickham (2003, p.42) states, in forming a group "consideration must...be given to the specific problems and characteristics of the clients". We were also focused on building on the strengths that Aboriginal women brought to the group. We were very aware that Aboriginal peoples have experienced a legacy of loss as a direct result of colonial and imperial imposition. However, we were also aware that Aboriginal peoples have resisted colonial imposition and have many strengths as a people. And, as mentioned previously, while there is diversity across Aboriginal peoples there are also commonalities that allow for various cultural/spiritual teachings to be shared and mutually understood. An example would be the teachings of the Cree Medicine Wheel and the significance of the number four: Concepts such as the four cardinal directions and the four aspects of a person are common amongst a number of First Nation peoples. Indeed, the facilitator could identify teachings from her First Nation that were related to Cree teachings, for example, there are convergences between the facilitator's Haudenasaunee (Iroquois) teachings and Cree teachings regarding the connection between the four directions, the mind, body and spirit, as well as the Four Guardians or Grandfathers from the spirit world.

Another issue related to group formation had to do with including the facilitator's social work classmates in the group as participants – during the group, the facilitator was in her final year of undergraduate social work study in a Native Human Services program. Initially, the second and third authors felt that the group processes might be negatively affected given the power differential between group facilitators and participants. For one example, the participants might be reluctant to share personal experiences with a classmate or to be challenged by her. We also thought that there was potential for group dynamics to be brought into the classroom affecting that process as well. However, there was strong desire expressed by two women who were classmates of the first author to attend the group. They felt that the benefits would outweigh any

perceived drawbacks or challenges. What was also unique about these potential participants was that they were enrolled in a specifically Native social work degree program and had already had a number of experiences of sharing close personal information in classes. This is a common experience within this program, which is based on the belief that personal growth and healing are important components of a Native social work education.

This issue reminded us to contemplate the nature of working in smaller communities, and with Aboriginal peoples. Indeed, the reality of our physical location is that many Aboriginal groups and peoples know each other. Thus, the challenge is to find ways to work ethically and professionally as part of the community (Schmidt, 2005). The facilitator was in favour of including her classmates and for Aboriginal peoples one of the ways that ethical professional practice can be guided is by way of traditional teachings and practices, which embody concepts of respect, kindness, and mutual sharing. The group was based on these traditional values and fundamental principles and ethics. For instance, the facilitator's Haudenosaunee teaching known as "The Great Law" (Degiya'göih Resources, 2003) embodies the belief that respect is a universal concept that employs the ethics of spirituality in both a professional and personal manner. Also, teachings of the Ojibway were understood to underpin and guide the group because the group took place in Ojibway territory and it was important to acknowledge this territory. These teachings include the Seven Grandfather teachings and the Seven Concepts of Respect, Honesty, Bravery, Humility, Love, Wisdom and Truth. Given all of these factors, we agreed that including the facilitator's classmates was appropriate. We began the group with eight women/participants. Generally, the group work literature agrees that an optimal number of participants ranges from 5 to 12 if everyone is expected to participate and there is emphasis on group relationships (Reid, 1991).

The relevance of process

The importance of a culturally relevant and ethical process in conducting practice and research with Aboriginal peoples is now well established (Baskin, 2005). In order to ensure a supportive setting within which to carry out the group, we worked in partnership with the Shkagamik-Kwe Health Centre, which describes its mission as providing programs and services in a culturally appropriate manner to Aboriginal people. It is a culturally based "Wholistic Health Centre" dedicated to balanced and healthy lifestyles ([see http://shkagamik-kwe.org/](http://shkagamik-kwe.org/)). Situating the group within the health centre was crucial to the overall process and success of the project.

Shkagamik-Kwe employs qualified helping/health professionals as well as Native elders and healers. The facilitator consulted with one Native Elder and the Traditional Coordinator for information concerning traditional Ojibway knowledge/spirituality. Thus, the health centre's staff provided the group facilitator with direction, support and access to traditional services and culturally relevant materials. In fact, because the group facilitator's home community was not the same as most of the women in the group, the connections with the Elders at Shkagamik-Kwe was invaluable in that they offered support, information, guidance, and sanction for the facilitator. This was important given that the facilitator held some practices and traditional teachings that were different from the participants. The collaborators from Shkagamik-Kwe all took part in the opening and closing ceremonies described earlier. Also, Shkagamik-Kwe's mental health workers were available as a resource to provide additional and on-going counseling services for

the group participants if the need arose. They also advertised the group to their clientele and facilitated referrals to it. We are continuing to work with Shkagamik-Kwe with the hope that they will continue to deliver the arts-based group program.

Group methods and purpose

The Aboriginal women in the group all had previous group experiences. Many of these prior experiences involved sharing and/or talking circles, and arts and crafts groups. However, our group was a different experience for the participants in that the group was much more structured around specific exercises and aimed at achieving a particular goal (improved self-awareness and self-esteem). As such, we decided to limit the time for check-in at the beginning of each group session in order to allow for adequate time for the creative arts activities that followed. For a few women this limit seemed to be a challenge that was based in past group experiences. Regarding this challenge, options for future groups could include having longer group sessions perhaps offering the group in a different format such as a workshop, planning fewer activities for each group session, or explaining very clearly the nature of the group.

The facilitator also had to develop her role in guiding and challenging the women to develop an analysis of their arts-based creations. Learning to gently challenge the women to explore more deeply what they had created so that they could develop insight was a particular challenge for the facilitator, which stemmed from both limited group practice experience and her own experiences of colonization. Also, part of this challenge was related to the concept of “non-interference” which is described by many Aboriginal people as respect for, and trust in, how other people are living their lives. Furthermore, it is primarily the parents and elders in families that take up the role of helping family members work through and understand problems. Consequently, sometimes the facilitator felt unsure about how to explore the group participants’ personal issues. By processing these matters with the co-authors and by relying on the deep wisdom in the traditional spiritual/cultural teachings of respect and caring, the facilitator was able to develop her ability to gently guide the participants in self-exploration.

Moreover, it is the first author’s own experience that expressing one’s feelings and thoughts for the benefit of healing and the development of self-identity is often a difficult process for many Aboriginal people. As a young adult, the facilitator attended school off-reserve, and noted that there seemed to be a sense of alienation and a different way of communicating amongst her and her Aboriginal peers compared with the mainstream students and school. Also, in groups that she has personally taken part in, as well as in our group, some people seem caught between a desire to share about personal family problems, and feelings of betrayal and shame of their families and communities. These effects of colonization are not surprising and have created barriers to communication, but point out how methods such as arts-based processes might be particularly helpful for Aboriginal people who are unable for a variety of reasons to communicate directly about challenging and difficult life experiences. In fact, these methods may help to revitalize practices and processes that were historically a part of Native culture, spirituality, and identity.

Attrition from the group

Although eight women indicated that they wanted to attend the group, a core group of four participants attended most of the sessions and ended the group. Probably a combination of factors were implicated in this attrition and perhaps if we had been able to better attend to some of these, group attendance could have been improved. However, some of these factors are not amenable to change and researchers/practitioners might have to shift their expectations accordingly. First, the reality that the second author is a non-Aboriginal person probably affected the process even though the research team worked in partnership with Shkagamik-Kwe Health Centre, attempting to make all processes transparent and consistent with Aboriginal methodologies and practices. As Baskin (2005) explains, Aboriginal communities have experienced the negative and demoralizing effects of researchers who have not acted in culturally appropriate ways. Thus, there is understandably a distrust of mainstream service providers, researchers and anyone who is in a position of power outside of the community (Brant Castellano, 2004). In our project, consistent with methods that are guided by Aboriginal values, we focused on the strengths of the participants, and we incorporated knowledge shared by the Elder and Traditional Coordinator. We note however, that it may take more time than anticipated to build productive and appropriate connections with Aboriginal collaborators and participants. Second, the women who were referred to the group had difficult and stressful life situations. Most of the women were single mothers and/or were involved in dysfunctional relationships. Some had problems with addictions. These issues can all be connected with past and present experiences of colonization. These effects made participating regularly in an ongoing group difficult due to the crisis-oriented nature of many of their lives. Perhaps a different group format, for example, a longer group held once a month would be more effective and feasible. Third, the group was held in the evening and a lack of child-care was definitely an impediment for some especially since most of the participants were disconnected with larger familial and community systems that could assist with child care. Finally, the different nature of this group, as was described earlier, might have been a drawback for some of the women who were used to participating in sharing and talking circles. Thus, their expectations might have been at odds with their experience of the group.

Conclusion

The incorporation and consideration of Aboriginal viewpoints within the social work and spirituality literature makes sense because Aboriginal cultures, spiritualities and helping practices are so intimately connected. This exploration can help mainstream social workers to further develop their analysis and understanding of spiritually-sensitive practices and methods particularly in work with Aboriginal clients. Aboriginal perspectives can certainly remind us about the importance of kindness, respect, mutual sharing, spirituality and its intimate connections with culture, and paying attention to the manner in which we get things done. In this paper we also discussed issues related to facilitating a holistic arts-based group with a small group of Aboriginal women. These included the importance of process and working in partnership with appropriate and relevant community support systems; the diversity amongst Aboriginal peoples, which in our case influenced our thinking about group inclusion; the connections inherent in Aboriginal communities that challenge mainstream social workers in thinking about practice processes and practice ethics; the appropriateness of group work and arts-

based methods for Aboriginal peoples; and the effects of colonization on Aboriginal people's lives that can affect their engagement with programs and services, and which shaped the group's discussions.

Based on our experiences of conducting this group and on the feedback provided by group participants and collaborators from Shkagamik-Kwe Health Centre, we are encouraged to believe that there is merit in further exploring the usefulness of holistic arts-based group work with Aboriginal women. There is certainly a need for research that will explore these methods, and investigate the effectiveness of spiritually-sensitive arts-based practices (Herring, 1997). Our work is a beginning in this direction.

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² Aboriginal is used as an inclusive term to include Status and Non-status First Nations, Metis and Inuit. It is important to note that diversity exists amongst Aboriginal peoples as reflected in the languages, cultures, traditions, and philosophical beliefs. We use the terms Aboriginal and Native interchangeably in this paper.