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Culturally Responsive Social Work Methods for Use with Indigenous Peoples

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Introduction

The history of the American social work profession and its interactions with Indigenous peoples is intimately connected to colonial imperialism. The profession of social work has been complicit and outright participatory in various forms of settler state violence, especially in the form of forced cultural assimilation through the Indian Adoption Project and Indian Residential schools. How can non-Indigenous people approach the profession of social work through a decolonizing lens? How can non-Indigenous social workers strive for cultural competence in their work with Indigenous clients? In this work, I explore these questions, along with the notion of culturally responsive social work as it applies to Indigenous peoples, and suggest that non-Indigenous social workers have a moral imperative to work towards utilizing this lens if they wish to avoid perpetuating colonial imperialism.

Terms Defined

Culturally responsive social work - social work that takes into account an individual’s specific cultural experience and aims to serve within that framework

Cultural competence - the ability to integrate cultural knowledge and skills for a more culturally appropriate and trauma informed helping practice

Strengths based approach - a strengths based approach centers a client’s strengths instead of their deficits, and focuses on leveraging these strengths to meet their goals

Trauma informed care - treatment that takes into account a client’s trauma and the impact that it may have had on their bodies and lives

Cultural Competence

Cultural competence is defined as the ability to integrate cultural knowledge and skills for a more culturally appropriate helping practice. Three categories are crucially important to a culturally competent practice in the Indigenous context: knowledge, skills, and values. **Knowledge** stresses an understanding of the history and current reality of Indigenous life on this continent - from precolonial contact to the current era, including social, spiritual and legal aspects. A general knowledge of colonialism and oppression is useful. **Skills** include ‘containment skills’ - active listening, tolerating silences, decentering one’s own worldview. Attention must be paid to the PTSD and generational trauma too often experienced by Indigenous peoples. **Values** stresses helper wellness, and a grounding in one’s own community. Additionally, a commitment to social justice and to active decolonization is crucial.

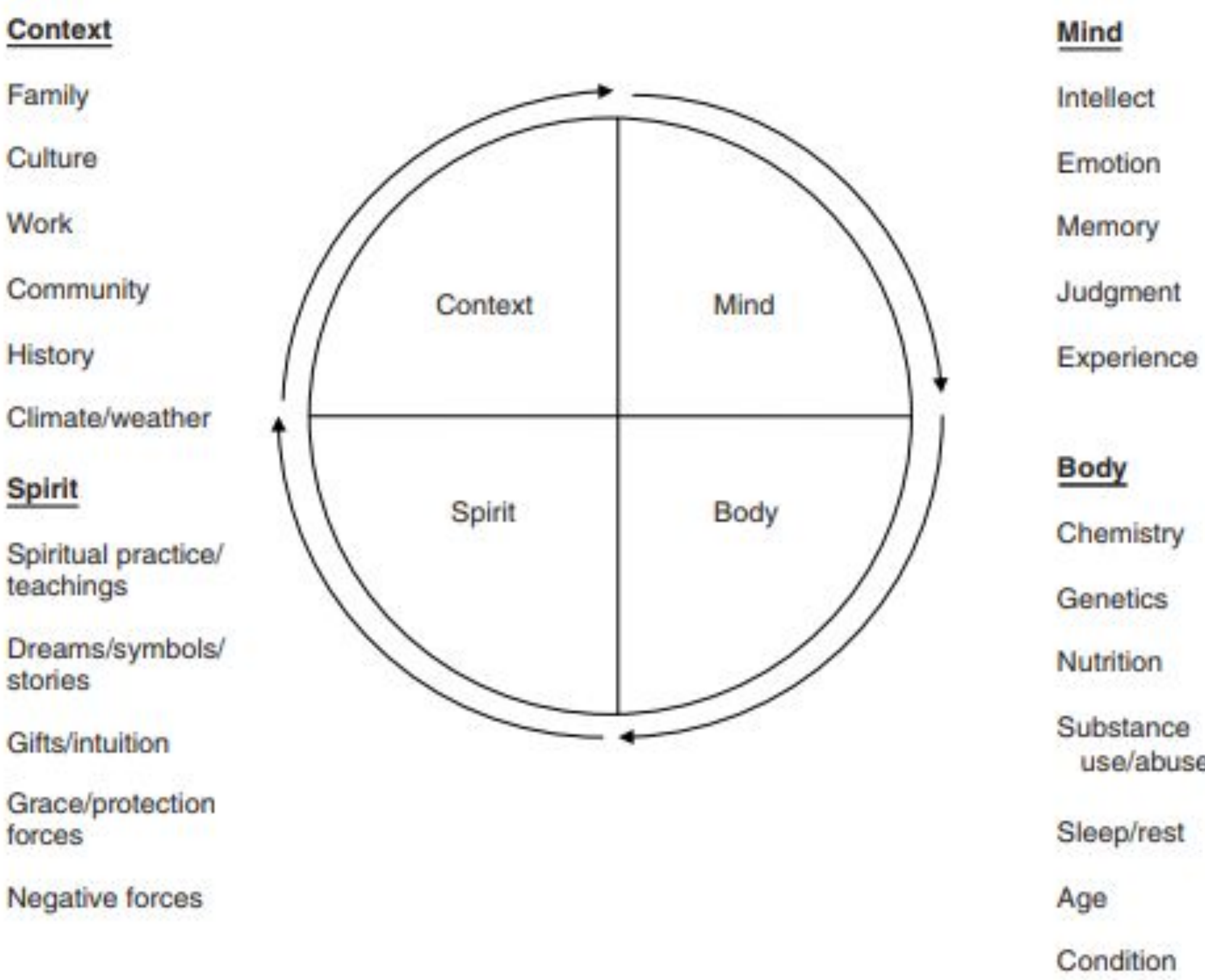
Relational Worldview model

In this model, a four quadrant circle represents four major factors that must come into balance for ideal mind/body health. The four quadrants are **Context, Mind, Body, and Spirit**. Context includes social influences such as family, community, culture, work, and school. Mind includes memory, emotion, intellect, knowledge, judgement, and lived experience. Body includes genetics, nutrition, gender, embodied trauma, and substance abuse. The spiritual quadrant includes spiritual teachings and practices, traditions, dreams, intuition and stories. Balance between these four quadrants is a goal.

“Historical Trauma Response Among Natives and Its Relationship with Substance Abuse: A Lakota Illustration”

Historical trauma theory describes the emotional and psychological wounding that accumulates over the lifespan and across generations after significantly traumatic group experiences. This theory expands on the limited diagnosis of PTSD, which fails to accurately describe the generational experience of Indigenous trauma related to colonial violence. The historical trauma response is the various psychological and physiological features caused by this trauma, as well as the physical embodiment of trauma. The Historical Trauma and Unresolved Grief Intervention (HTUG) focuses on reducing the negative responses to historical trauma through intensive psychoeducational group experiences. Participants are exposed to audiovisual materials to stimulate historically accurate traumatic memories to provide opportunities for integration of the trauma and cathartic working through required for healing.

The Relational World View Model



Strengths Based Well Being Indicators

Culturally competent social work strives to work from a ‘strengths based’ perspective - Instead of asking ‘What’s wrong with this client, and how can we help fix it?’, a strengths based approach aims to ask ‘What strengths does this client have, and how can we help them leverage those strengths to meet their goals?’. Indigenous worldviews call for a description of health and well-being based on strength, reflecting the interconnectedness of child, family, and community with cultural and spiritual practices. When working with Indigenous people, well-being indicators that reflect these Indigenous perspectives should be used. The Relational Worldview model is an ideal framework for evaluating Indigenous well being through the use of these indicators. It stresses a strengths based approach, focused on bringing an individual or system (family, community, organization) into balance. This approach works to center the Indigenous world view in measures of health and well being.

Conclusions

Methods of social caring for use with Indigenous peoples must respond to the devastating legacy of colonialism, while centering the strengths and power of Indigenous cultures and modes of spirituality. To do so, culturally competent social work methods must be trauma informed, and they must be historically aware, recognizing that while Indigenous people have seen their world nearly destroyed, they have survived, maintaining culture, language, and people - in the midst of 400 years of attempts to destroy them. Social work methods designed for use with Indigenous people must center a deep understanding of their cultural strength.

Each of the methods surveyed here aims to help Indigenous people not just to survive in colonized North America, but to actively ground healing from generational trauma in the process of inheriting and transmitting their culture. Social work and mental health care methods based in Indigenous culture and spirituality (with specific attention paid to the history of Indigenous peoples on this continent) need to continue to be developed and expanded, and their practice and use must be led by Indigenous people. All of these things are possible, and the profession of social work has a critical role to play.

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