Crying for a Vision: The Native American Sweat Lodge Ceremony as Therapeutic Intervention

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The Native American sweat lodge ceremony or sweat therapy is being used increasingly in various medical, mental health, correctional, and substance abuse treatment centers serving both Native and non-Native clients. This article explores the sweat lodge ceremony’s background, elements of Native American spirituality, origin story, cultural symbolism, prayer, and contemporary use. Current evidence of effectiveness and therapeutic benefits is presented, then implications for integrating the sweat lodge ceremony as a complementary counseling approach are discussed.

The most important thing to remember about ceremony is that it is a way for humans to give back to the Creation some of the energy that they are always receiving. The Earth Mother constantly gives us two-leggeds a surface on which to place our two feet; Father Sun warms us, and Grandmother Moon brings dreams. The element of Earth gives us a place to grow food and the ability to make homes and tools. The water keeps us alive. The fire warms our homes and cooks our food. The air gives us the sacred breath of life. Through ceremony, we learn how to give back.

—Sun Bear, Anishinaabe Nation, cited in McFadden, 1994, p. 30

There are many different ceremonies used across Native American nations for healing, giving thanks, celebrating, clearing the way, and blessing (Garrett & Garrett, 2003; Hirschfelder & de Montano, 1998; Oswalt, 2005). From a Native perspective, the main purpose of such healing ceremonies is to “keep oneself in good relations.” This can mean honoring or healing a relation or connection with oneself, others (relationships; i.e., family, friends, community), the natural environment, or the spirit world. The underlying goal of these ceremonies, from a Native perspective, is almost always to offer thanks in order to create and maintain a strong sense of connection through harmony and balance of mind, body, and spirit with the natural environment.

Increasingly, culturally based interventions and techniques such as the sweat lodge ceremony or sweat therapy, based on Native traditions of healing, are being used in clinical, mental health, correctional, and substance abuse treatment centers serving both Native and non-Native clients (Cohen, 2003; Smith, 2005; Thomason, 2000). Sweat therapy is the combination of intense heat exposure with psychotherapy or counseling, ideally incorporating group process (Colmant, 2006). Although little empirical evidence exists demonstrating the effectiveness of sweat lodge ceremony or sweat therapy, because of its widespread and increasing use across settings, it is important to better understand the origin and current use of this culturally based intervention with Native and non-Native populations.

The purpose of this article is to explore the nature and purpose of the Native American sweat lodge ceremony and the practice of sweat therapy as a culturally based form of therapeutic healing that can be useful with Native and non-Native American clients. This will be done through exploration of the sweat lodge ceremony in terms of background, elements of Native American spirituality, an example of an origin story, cultural symbolism, an example of a sweat lodge ceremony prayer, description of one form of the actual ceremony, and discussion of the ceremony’s contemporary use in Native communities and other therapeutic settings. In addition, we present current evidence of effectiveness along with an

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The Native American Sweat Lodge Ceremony

overview of therapeutic benefits, then discuss implications for integrating the sweat lodge ceremony or sweat therapy as a complementary approach to counseling.

Understanding the Native American Sweat Lodge

As a Native American tradition that has been practiced by many Native nations since ancient times, the sweat lodge ceremony honors the process of transformation and healing that is central to the modern-day practice of Native traditionalism across nations. Many Native American traditionalists believe that to ensure harmony, balance, and wellness, a person must participate in the ritualized cleansing of the mind, body, and spirit provided through the sweat lodge ceremony. This is a time for purifying oneself by joining with the powers of Mother Earth and those of the Universal Circle, for giving thanks, and for asking that oneself and others be blessed (Brown, 1972). As such, the sweat lodge ceremony is a widely accepted and practiced tradition that serves to purify those undergoing any sort of transformation or healing.

In contrast to a popular Western perspective on individualized transformation as a fairly solitary process of self-actualization, traditional Native peoples have always believed that healing and transformation should take place in the presence of a person's support network (i.e., family, clan, community) as a way of drawing on the natural support and understanding that exist within these relationships (M. T. Garrett & Carroll, 2000). In this way, the sweat lodge ceremony serves a sacred purpose through the ritual healing or cleansing of body, mind, and spirit while bringing people together to honor the energy of life. Each person enters the lodge with his or her own concerns, and together, participants seek both individual and group harmony and balance by sweating, praying, singing, talking, and sometimes just sitting together in silence.

Background

Sweat baths, sweat houses, and sweat lodges have been used across cultures since before recorded history. Colmant and Merta (1999) listed the use of some form of sweat in Celtic and Teutonic practices, in Africa, Melanesia, New Guinea, Polynesia, Eastern Europe, Finland, as well as among the Aztecs, to name a few. Much of the current understanding of significance of group sweating comes through descriptive research such as ethnographic works that have offered views into the sauna culture of Austria, the shvitz in the Jewish tradition, the Finnish sauna, the Russian bania, and the Islamic hammam (Colmant, Eason, Winterowd, Jacobs, & Cashel, 2005).

Within Native nations, the use of varying forms of sweat lodge or "hothouse" has been well documented, although the structure and process differ greatly from nation to nation (Oswalt, 2005). The importance of the sweat lodge ceremony among Native peoples has traditionally served many purposes, including basic bathing; warmth; socialization as a form of schooling for the young to be taught their history, heritage, language, culture, myths, and religion; celebration; ceremonial cleansing; physical doctoring; spiritual training; and preparation for war, hunting, trips, marriage, vision quest, and various other rites of passage, cleansing, and healing (Colmant & Merta, 1999; Oswalt, 2005; Smith, 2005).

Elements of Native American Spirituality

Native American spirituality involved in the sweat lodge ceremony revolves around the essential concept of seeking harmony and balance in one's relationship with the natural environment (Deloria, Silko, & Tinker, 2003). Balance in Native spirituality is a desired state wherein a person is in harmony with the universe—walking in step with the natural way (flow) of things, so to speak. Being in harmony means being in step with the universe and with its sacred rhythms; this is what many Native people refer to as "good medicine" (M. T. Garrett & Wilbur, 1999).

By contrast, being in disharmony or "dis-ease" means being out of step with the universe and its sacred rhythms, therefore inviting illness. Disharmony results when we are out of balance, our energies are unfocused or poorly focused, and we lose sight of our place in the universe.

Well being occurs when we seek and find our unique place in the universe and experience the continuous cycle of receiving and giving through respect and reverence for the beauty of all living things. M. T. Garrett and Garrett (2002) and M. T. Garrett, Brubaker, Torres Rivera, West-Olatunji, and Conwill (2008) described this through a Native American culturally based individual and group technique called Ayeli or "coming to center," in which clients seek answers for themselves, both in the context of counseling and in the context of their lives, and they stand in relation to the spiritual forces of the four essential elements of life represented by the four compass directions. Each respective direction symbolizes a dimension of life, with the implied interaction between opposites and among all four directions as a sign of one's harmony and balance in life and overall center. These directions are usually presented and experienced in ceremony: (a) East, belonging and spirit characterized by a sense of caring and connection with certain special others—Who or what are you a part of, where do you belong or (opposite) not belong? (b) South, inner mastery and connection with the environment characterized by a recognition of one's abilities and a meaningful sense of achievement in life—What do you enjoy doing or do well and (opposite) not enjoy doing or not do well? (c) West, independence and physical awareness and resolve characterized by a belief in oneself through the presence of self-awareness, self-reliance, and self-discipline—What are your strengths, what is important to you? (d) North, generosity and wisdom of the mind characterized by an openness to different experiences through the recognition of a (potential) unique personal contribution—What do you have to offer or contribute to others and (opposite) what do you have to receive...
from others? In the context of this approach, wellness of the mind, body, spirit, and natural environment is an expression of the proper balance in the relationship of all things. If a person disturbs or disrupts the natural balance of relationship, illness or disease in any of the four areas may be the result and must be corrected through ceremony. This is one of the primary reasons for keeping one’s personal life energy strong and clear in relation to others and the natural environment.

For many Native Americans, the concept of health and wellness is not only a physical state but a spiritual one as well. Therefore, within a cultural perspective that holds the land and community in the highest esteem, certain places in the natural environment are remembered within Native communities as sacred places where ceremonies are held to honor that sacred energy of life (Deloria et al., 2003; M. T. Garrett & Garrett, 2003; Hirschfelder & de Montano, 1998). These are the places where sweat lodges are constructed because, for traditional Native peoples, the place itself holds great spiritual power and significance in which to have healing take place in a proper way.

How the Sweat Lodge Came to Be

The following is an origin story adapted from many tribal traditions (Lake, 1991, pp. 153–154) that describe how the first sweat lodge came into existence and how it became a sacred healing tool for all peoples:

In the beginning, a long, long time ago, a sickness came to the First People. It was decided that a council should be held to discuss the problem. From every direction, all living beings came together in a great council to discuss the situation. For four days, they fasted, prayed, meditated, and sought visions and guidance together seeking Medicine to help in some way.

Eagle and Hummingbird were the first to come into the Circle from east, bringing a spark from the Sun to light the sacred fire. Trees and Beaver were next to come in from the south, offering some wood for the fire, rocks from the Earth to surround it, and bringing their little sister tobacco to make offerings. Bear came next from the west, bringing a basket filled with water from the rushing river to help contain the fire. From the north, Hawk and Deer came into the Circle bringing the quietness of wind to give breath of life to the sacred fire.

As the many clans of living beings talked and prayed together, no one noticed that the fire had become quite large. In a panic, Raven hustled over to the edge of the fire trying to help contain it, but as he got close, the fire singed his feathers black. Startled, he tripped over some of the rocks trying to get away from the heat, and knocked over Bear’s basket full of water onto the fire. As it began to steam, Raven started squawking for help. Bear urged all the animals to hurry and cover Raven with their hides. As all the animals covered Raven, he continued to sing and began to sweat. In this way, the entire community had offered their support to Raven in his time of need.

When it was all over, Raven exclaimed that he had a great vision that this was to be called a Sweat Lodge that would be used for prayer and for healing. That is how the first Sweat Lodge came to be, and that is how Raven became known as a great doctor. But he never was a good singer. And so, it is good.

From this ancient story, one may connect to the seamless bond between nature, healing, and humankind, together represented in the cultural symbolism of the sweat lodge.

Cultural Symbolism of the Sweat Lodge

Although they vary from nation to nation, the many elements comprising the sweat lodge ceremony hold deep cultural and spiritual significance. For instance, the very circular (sometimes oval) nature of the lodge itself represents both the universe and the womb from which all life originates, with the four cardinal directions of the universe, also symbolizing the power of the four elements of fire, earth, water, and wind. The water used in the ceremony not only is the one element that is essential to all living things but also symbolizes the life-giving power of the Creator, and the steam that flows from being poured upon the hot stones represents the visible prayers of the people rising to the Creator, as well as the release of ancient knowledge contained within the stones who are viewed as elders. The herbs and tobacco used in the ceremony too represent the energy of all living things through the sacredness of prayers being offered in a respectful manner.

Originally, many sweat lodges were covered with animal skins; in many instances today, blankets or tarps are used instead. The opening of the lodge is usually low so that participants must get down on hands and knees to enter, symbolic of returning to the womb of Mother Earth in a humble manner, being immersed in total darkness once inside. By contrast, opening of the flap that covers the entrance to the lodge once inside represents liberation from the darkness of ignorance and ego to enter again into the world of truth, light, and goodness as a rebirth of spirit (Brown, 1972).

Sweat Lodge Prayer

The following prayer (Lake, 1991, pp. 173–174) is an example of the prayer used in a medicine sweat or sweat lodge ceremony:

Oh Great Creator, we come before you in a humble manner and ask for your help. We offer these herbs and pray. To the
The Native American Sweat Lodge Ceremony

four sacred directions and powers of the Universe we pray: to the spirits of the air in the north, to the spirits of the fire in the east, to the spirits of the Earth in the south, and to the spirits of the water in the west.

We pray and give thanks to the Grandfather Sun, the Grandmother Moon, to the Mother Earth, and all our relations in Nature. We thank you for your power, energy, gifts and resources, because without you, we would not be able to live and survive. We ask that you forgive us if we have ever harmed or hurt you. We pray, offer this tobacco and herbs, and ask that you doctor us, heal us, purify us, and protect us. We pray for our elders, women, children, and fellow human beings. We ask for peace, harmony, and healing worldwide.

The Ceremony

In preparation for the sweat lodge ceremony, a sacred place in which to conduct the ceremony is sought out (if one is not already present), usually in close proximity to a creek, river, pond, or lake. Careful attention is given to methods emphasizing the natural law of reciprocity, in which something is given for everything that is respectfully taken to honor and maintain the harmony and balance of interrelationship (J. T. Garrett & Garrett, 1996, 2002; M. T. Garrett, 1998). The sweat lodge itself, usually a small turtle-shaped dwelling, is constructed by searching out and asking permission from the various materials of Mother Earth for their willing participation in the ceremony (e.g., tree saplings, wood, bark, rocks). The rock pit is formed in the center of the designated sacred spot around which the lodge is constructed from materials placed in relation to the four directions—east, south, west, and north—and covered with animal hides, blankets, tarps, woven mats, or bark and sod.

Meanwhile, the Fire Keeper, usually a young apprentice, has the responsibility of tending the sacred fire in which the ceremonial rocks are being heated. Participants in the ceremony strip themselves of clothing and any personal belongings, such as jewelry, and enter the sweat lodge or “womb of Mother Earth” one by one, usually on their hands and knees to show humility and respect for the earth. Inside, participants sit in the sacred circle, representing the circle of life. Next, the rocks are brought into the lodge, arranged to represent the four directions, and the flap or door opening is sealed shut. The darkness in the lodge represents the darkness of the spirit, our ignorance, which requires purification in order to have light (Brown, 1972).

The ceremony usually begins with silence, thought by some to be the “true voice of the Creator.” After invocation to the Great Spirit, Mother Earth, the four directions, the spirits, and all the relations in nature, special water or an herbal mixture is poured over the heated rocks producing a purifying steam that fills the lodge. The pipe (or some other medicine object) is passed from person to person, usually clockwise, imitating the path of the sun, moving from the east around to the west and back around to the east again. This is repeated several times in cycles known as rounds. Participants pray for their families, friends, each other, and themselves, asking for strength, healing, protection, blessing, or forgiveness for any harm committed against any living creature in nature. In addition, songs might be sung, rites and rituals performed, or problems discussed. After the ceremony has been completed, participants emerge from the sweat lodge to bathe in the cooling waters of the nearby creek, river, pond, or lake. Afterward, the participants take time to reflect with one another on their experience (Lake, 1991).

Contemporary Use

The use of medicine sweets, as they are known, is still widespread across Native nations today. It is not uncommon in many Native communities, for example, to see small sweat lodges of varying kinds right beside or behind people’s houses. From a Native traditional perspective, it is a practical and spiritual way of life for many who use the medicine sweat on a regular basis to keep in good relations and maintain mental, physical, and spiritual wellness in a traditional way.

Similarly, the application of some form of Native American sweat in therapeutic settings has increased over the past few decades. In many instances, use of the Native American sweat lodge in therapeutic settings has centered on attempts to offer culturally responsive services to Native clients in a way that is congruent with their cultural way of life. In this vein, application of traditions such as the sweat lodge ceremony has been used with many Native and non-Native clients as a way to approach a mending of the “broken circle,” an indigenous concept indicating the potential neglect of traditional ways that can result in dis-ease or disharmony within the individual, family, clan, or community (M. T. Garrett & Carroll, 2000; Vick, Smith, & Iron Rope Herrera, 1998). This has been a central concept, for example, in the application of such traditional Native ceremonies in the treatment of alcoholism and other substance dependence issues at such facilities as residential treatment centers both on and off reservations (Thomason, 2000). Sweat lodges and other traditional healing approaches are also used in prisons as well as medical settings such as hospitals and clinics (Smith, 2005). In fact, more than 50% of the Indian Health Service facilities currently make use of sweat lodges as complementary treatments (Cohen, 2003). It is important to reemphasize that this type of culturally responsive intervention, while unique, is not something new either in terms of historical ceremonial use or of contemporary therapeutic intervention. Given that, a number of studies have shown the effectiveness of mental health counselors, therapists, and spiritual healers joining forces to work with individuals, groups, and communities (see Gilene, Fish, & Draguns, 2004; Torres Rivera, 2005). Despite this, more information is needed to help explore the reported effectiveness of such practices.
Evidence of Effectiveness

Although little empirical evidence exists showing the effectiveness of the use of sweat lodge in contemporary settings, the few studies that do exist indicate the significant impact of this practice on participants, both Native and non-Native alike (Colmant, 2006; Colmant et al., 2005; Colmant & Merta, 1999, 2000; Gossage et al., 2003; Schiff & Moore, 2006). However, there are many studies that have examined the physiological effects of sweating and a handful that have studied the benefits of sweat therapy in particular.

The direct physical benefits of sweating have been well documented in the literature (Colmant et al., 2005; Dunn, 2004; Hannuksela & Ellahham, 2001; Smith, 2005). Hannuksela and Ellahham (2001) conducted a comprehensive review of the effects of sweating in a meta-analysis of 271 studies over the last 40 years. Results indicated that the acute physiological effects of sweating include increases in skin and rectal temperature, skin blood flow, heart rate, cardiac output, cardiac stroke volume, systolic blood pressure, vital capacity, tidal volume, minute ventilation, and forced expiratory volume of the lungs, along with decreases in diastolic blood pressure and pulmonary congestion. Colmant et al. (2005) confirmed additional health benefits of sweating by the use of the sauna or sweat lodge, noting that it promotes healthier skin, aids in eliminating toxins, enhances immunity, and promotes deeper sleep, pain relief, and muscle relaxation. Neurologically, sweating from these practices activates the sympathetic nervous system and stimulates the hormonal system (Colmant et al., 2005).

The process of the therapeutic sweat involves bodily toxins being released through the skin, where increasing the body temperature to between 102° and 106° Fahrenheit creates a hostile environment for bacterial and viral infections (Hannuksela & Ellahham, 2001). In addition, sweating removes excess salt, which creates a benefit for those with mild hypertension. Sweating also flushes toxic metals such as copper, lead, and mercury from the body, while dilating the capillaries, increasing blood flow to the skin, and relieving stiffness and soreness.

Sweat lodge therapy combines the physical benefits of sweating with other therapeutic benefits that are realized in other contemporary counseling approaches, which together help clients better than by relying on these approaches separately (Koss-Chioino, 2008). To confirm this belief, Colmant (2006) examined the efficacy of sweat therapy as a group counseling technique by exploring the effects of sweat and nonsweat group counseling conditions on feeling states and on group therapeutic factors with a group of college students who met in groups weekly for six sessions. Eighty-five college students were randomly assigned to eight sessions of either a sweat or nonsweat group counseling condition. Measures included the Critical Incident Scale, a measure of spirituality and emotional well-being. Results showed a significant increase in spiritual and emotional well-being directly attributable to participation in the ceremony.

Colmant et al. (2005) examined the effects of sweat therapy on group dynamics and affect with 24 undergraduates that included 12 men and 12 women, ages ranging from 18 to 45 years. Participants were separated by gender and randomly assigned to eight sessions of either a sweat or nonsweat group counseling condition. Measures included the Critical Incident Questionnaire, the Harvard Community Health Plan Group Cohesiveness Scale, and the Positive and Negative Affect Scale. The sweat therapy participants reported more therapeutic factors having an impact on their group counseling experience, rated sessions as more beneficial, and interacted with stronger group cohesion compared with the nonsweat therapy participants. Overall, group sweating promoted the operation of therapeutic factors and served a therapeutic function in itself. There were no significant group differences in affect on immediate postsession measures. In addition to enhancing the group therapy experience, the sweat participants reported greater relaxation, stress relief, and a sense of accomplishment as examples of therapeutic outcomes for the process.

In a similar vein, sweat lodge ceremonies have proved effective among inmates as evidenced by Gossage et al. (2003), who examined the impact of this practice at the Dine' Center for Substance Abuse Treatment with inmates during a 3-year period. Participants included 123 inmates ranging in age from 18 to 64 years, all of whom participated in sweat lodge ceremonies. Four self-administered questionnaires were developed to gather data from the inmates. Results showed significant improvement in several cultural, social, and physical variables measured, including increases in the participants' relationship to the mineral, animal, and human world; increases in...
The Native American Sweat Lodge Ceremony

the level of social and family support; decreases in violent acts; decreases in medical problems and the degree to which participants were bothered by those medical problems, along with increases in feelings of overall physical wellness; and substantial improvement in marital status. Overall, the data showed that participants were drinking less (from a mean of 6.7 drinks to a mean of 5.3), although this decrease was not statistically significant. Gossage et al. also reported results from a similar, prior study that analyzed data for 100 inmates who participated in sweat lodge ceremonies and found that the incarceration recidivism rate for those participants was only 7% compared with an estimated 30% to 40% for other inmates who did not participate in such ceremonies.

Sweat therapy has also benefited younger boys. Colmant and Merta (2000) examined the effects of combining group sweating with group counseling in a pilot study with four ethnically diverse boys with disruptive behavior residing at a group home. The boys participated in 12 sweat therapy sessions using a sauna. Measures used included the Critical Incidents Questionnaire. Results indicated that three of the four boys showed improvement in measures of self-esteem and treatment progress in the group home throughout the treatment period involving sweat therapy. Overall, the boys identified experiential group work, catharsis, universality, imitative behavior, and interpersonal learning as prominent therapeutic factors. Furthermore, the boys indicated that the sweating process helped them relax, relieved stress, and left them with a feeling of accomplishment.

Although the studies mentioned here offer some empirical evidence, it is clear more work needs to be done to examine the effectiveness of this and other culturally based interventions. However, all indications show that the sweat lodge is seen as a powerful and culturally sensitive form of healing in a variety of settings that serve both Native and non-Native people.

Integrating Indigenous Practice With Counseling

As noted in the current research, prominent use of the sweat lodge is already occurring in conjunction with counseling and various forms of therapeutic treatment. Indeed, sweat therapy is consistent with the greater attention to multicultural interventions in mental health counseling and the general appeal of alternative and complementary medicine (Kronenberg, Cushman, Wade, Kalmuss, & Chao, 2007). While an appropriate fit for these trends, it is important to consider many details when integrating sweat lodge and counseling practices, both for Native and non-Native clients, including who should participate, where the ceremony should be conducted, and who should conduct it.

Purpose and Logistics

Respect is essential because the sweat lodge ceremony is sacred to Native peoples and should always be approached as such (Colmant & Merta, 1999). In addition to the earlier noted benefits, Smith (2005) pointed out that traditional healing methods such as the sweat lodge ceremony may help Native clients explore and reconcile issues around cultural identity. In this pursuit, counselors may choose to refer individual clients to local sweats or incorporate the sweat lodge in a group setting and should therefore consider ceremony logistics.

Medicine sweats, as they are known in the context of the sweat lodge ceremony, can last anywhere from minutes to days depending on the tribal tradition, the person conducting the ceremony, and the purpose of the sweat, as well as the needs of the persons involved in the ceremony. A serious misuse of the ceremony comes when it is approached by any of the participants as a test of endurance to prove one's power or strength. The sweat lodge ceremony is intended to serve just the opposite purpose, of allowing participants to free themselves from pursuits that are driven by ego and the need for attention or power that can interfere with harmony and balance. More importantly, from a physical standpoint, to approach the ceremony as an endurance test can be dangerous because it is physically taxing and can quickly take someone beyond their perceived physical limits. A good rule of thumb regarding this entire issue is quality, not quantity. Participants are encouraged to drink plenty of water on the day of the sweat, eat lightly, and wear loose, comfortable, lightweight clothing.

Participants

Another important consideration is who should participate. From a purely physical standpoint, there are clear cautions against participation by people who would be adversely affected, such as pregnant women, people with heart conditions, or anyone taking medication who may be endangered from the physical strain of a prolonged sweat. People who are very underweight or overweight or those having difficulty regulating body temperature should also take caution. Furthermore, people who suffer from any condition such as claustrophobia or posttraumatic stress disorder are encouraged to avoid such a ceremony, which might trigger uncomfortable reactions to being in a dark, closed space for an extended period of time.

Clients will be chosen or referred to participate in the sweat lodge ceremony or sweat therapy based on their desire for a more cultural or spiritual approach to gain balance in their lives; desire for cleansing of the mind, body, and spirit; or just simply because of the clients' belief that sweat lodge therapy would improve health when used in combination with conventional talk therapy. It is not unusual to find people who use complementary and alternative approaches along with conventional ones rather than conventional approaches alone (see McCabe, 2007).

From a traditional Native perspective, there is the additional consideration of whether to conduct "mixed sweats" with men and women together. In many tribal traditions, there are strict spiritual taboos against conducting mixed sweats. The solution to this in many instances is to conduct separate sweats with
leaders or facilitators who are of the same gender; this can provide a powerful benefit in and of itself for various reasons.

Leader and Locale

In the traditional way, the leader of a sweat lodge ceremony is a Medicine person with specialized cultural and spiritual training in the use of the sweat and other healing methods according to the traditions of his or her nation. This person is chosen for training in the Medicine way because of family lineage and/or special abilities with spirits and with healing revealed to an existing Medicine person through demonstrated activity or through spirit messages.

A controversial issue arises over considerations for where to conduct the ceremony and who should conduct it. The “borrowing” of Native American healing practices and ceremonies has been problematic in the view of many Native people (Matheson, 1996), a result of the historical exploitation of Native peoples and culture by mainstream America (Aldred, 2000; Hernandez-Avila, 1996; Irwin, 1996). More specifically, misunderstanding has developed when non-Native people attempt to interpret or conduct Native ceremonies or spiritual practices without understanding the meaning of Native ceremonies and practices or without being qualified to do so (i.e., being trained as a Medicine person in that tribal tradition). For group counselors, the most ideal scenario would be to have a qualified Native person conduct the ceremony in a traditional way (Schiff & Moore, 2006). However, if such a person is not available, counselors should be careful in selecting a non-Native person to lead a variation of the sweat ceremony or should be trained themselves, respecting the origins of this sacred practice.

Allying With the Surrounding Community

It is important for counselors to obtain direct experience, if possible, with the sweat lodge to speak from a more informed perspective when it comes to processing client experiences with the ceremony. Essential aspects to counselors becoming more knowledgeable about the sweat lodge ceremony would include talking and working alongside local Native community members if possible, obtaining permission to refer clients as needed for participation in the ceremony, attending a sweat ceremony within a Native context if invited, obtaining general information about Native traditions and ceremonies, reviewing more of the literature specifically on sweat lodge practices, and gaining some knowledge of local indigenous healers who might serve as allies in the healing process for clients. By increasing their own knowledge and understanding of this ancient tradition and current practice, practitioners will be more likely to honor the various Native traditions from which the ceremony comes and will provide a richer experience in counseling for those who participate in the ceremony as part of their therapeutic process. When working in an agency setting, the counselor serves even more as a liaison, sharing this information and introducing the sweat lodge leader to agency clinicians and staff so they may support these efforts. Integrating indigenous approaches into one’s professional repertoire is dependent on the professional counselor’s ability to become the connection between her or his practice and the community (see Torres Rivera, 2005).

Summary

Participation in the sweat lodge can provide a deeply moving and truly spiritual experience that has been reported by some as having physical, mental, and spiritual benefits. As Colmant and Merta (1999) described, “the sweating process in the ceremony requires mental and physical fortitude, bringing with it a strong sense of accomplishment, thus providing an ideal vehicle for those who want to commit to change” (p. 69). The intent is to restore the common bond between the sacred and the secular practice to wholeness and harmony through the sweat lodge ceremony. Though specific to certain tribal traditions in terms of origin, the ceremony and variations thereof have found their way into current practice, both in current tribal ceremony and contemporary therapeutic practice. Many Native traditionalists approach the ceremony as a means for cleansing of body, mind, and spirit through a natural method intended to ensure wellness through harmony and balance with the relational and natural/environmental circles that surround us. As the quote in the beginning of this article states, the true purpose of ceremony is to provide a way for people to give back for all the things received and create an openness of spirit that makes life the growing, interconnected experience it is meant to be from a traditional Native perspective.

References


The Native American Sweat Lodge Ceremony
