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Social justice in school counseling: Addressing American Indian marginalization

Jesse A. Steinfeldt

Indiana University-Bloomington

Rex Stockton

Indiana University-Bloomington

Jesse Steinfeldt is an assistant professor and Rex Stockton is a Chancellor's Professor at Indiana University. Correspondence regarding this article should be directed to Jesse Steinfeldt, Indiana University EDUC 4064, 201 N. Rose Avenue, Bloomington, IN, 47401; 812 856-8331 (ph); 812 856-8333 (fax); jesstein@indiana.edu

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Abstract

Based on the importance of social justice in school counseling, this manuscript proposes a psychoeducational group that utilizes social justice principles within a liberation framework to address societal marginalization of American Indians. This 8-week group format enables students to explore societal portrayals of American Indians with the intent of developing action plans to address social injustice. Students in this group can have the opportunity to transform their emerging social justice awareness and knowledge into social justice skills. School counselors and students exposed to this group can become social justice role models for others, using this experience to address other issues of oppression and marginalization that are personally and professionally relevant to them.

Social justice in school counseling: Addressing American Indian marginalization

Social justice and advocacy issues have emerged as prominent themes within counseling in recent times (Aldarondo, 2007). Counselors operating within social justice paradigms, “strive to intentionally ameliorate social injustices that adversely affect the mental health of larger numbers of persons in oppressed and marginalized groups in contemporary society” (Crethar, Torres Rivera, & Nash, 2008, p. 269). Relative to other racial groups in the United States, American Indian communities face serious mental health issues, including disproportionately high rates of suicide, anxiety, depression, and substance abuse (IHS, 2009; Olson & Wahab, 2006). Given counseling’s commitment to social justice (i.e., ACA Advocacy Competencies), counselors have the opportunity to address how societal marginalization contributes to these disproportionate mental health outcomes within American Indian communities. Doing so can help students and counselors become advocates of change who are committed to addressing social injustices, including societal marginalization of American Indian culture.

The field of school counseling is in a unique position to address these social justice issues on a wide scale, for the benefit of both students and themselves. This manuscript outlines the format for a psychoeducational group, a group format that is congruent with the educational experiences in the school setting. While this proposed group has a single-issue focus (i.e., American Indian marginalization), students and leaders can create opportunities to “notice how different issues intersect in order to help participants understand the many parallels and connections among different forms of oppression” (Bell & Griffin, 2007, p. 68). Thus, participants in this group (e.g., students, counselors) can use this exploration of American Indian marginalization to further examine aspects of oppression that are personally and professionally relevant to them.

Social justice in counseling

Despite the prevalence and emphasis on social justice in counseling, varying definitions of social justice exist (Pieterse, Evans, Risner-Butner, Collins, & Mason, 2009). A broad definition that may resonate with the values of school counseling is offered by Goodman and colleagues (2004), who describe social justice as “the scholarship and professional action designed to change societal values, structures, policies, and practices, such that disadvantaged or marginalized groups gain increased access to these tools of self-determination” (p. 795). A more specific conceptualization of social justice articulates these broad principles within a liberation paradigm. Operating from this perspective, Steele (2008) proposed using a liberation model to develop social justice advocacy skills among counselors. A dedication to social justice requires individuals to cultivate an awareness of systemic forms of oppression and develop a liberatory consciousness (Love, 2000). This liberatory approach to social justice has been identified as an effective means for addressing issues within marginalized populations, particularly groups that have faced and continue to face psychological oppression (Duran, Firehammer, & Gonzalez, 2008). Thus, a psychoeducational group that utilizes social justice principles within a liberation framework may be an effective way to address the systemic marginalization of American Indians embedded within institutions in our society.

Mechanisms of American Indian marginalization

This process of institutional dissemination takes many forms. For example, American history textbooks are filled with widespread misinformation about American Indians (Loewen, 2008). Even well-intentioned teachers are miseducating and misleading students, who in turn continue to perpetuate stereotypes about American Indians. According to Loewen, “Historically, American Indians have been the most lied-about subset of our population” (2008, p. 93). Another prominent mechanism of perpetuating societal stereotypes and misinformation about American

Indians is the practice of using American Indian names and imagery in sports (King, Davis-Delano, Staurowsky, & Baca, 2006). Sports-related representations of American Indians (e.g., *Redskins*, *Braves*, *Indians*) misuse sacred cultural symbols and practices, perpetuate racist stereotypes of American Indians (e.g., noble savage, bloodthirsty savage, a historic race that only exists in past-tense status), and deny American Indians control over societal definitions of themselves (Fenelon, 1999; King, Staurowsky, Baca, Davis, & Pewewardy, 2002; Pewewardy, 1991; Russel, 2003; Staurowsky, 2004; Steinfeldt & Wong, in press; Williams, 2007).

The ACA produced a resolution in 2001 acknowledging that sports symbols and mascots that use American Indian imagery create a hostile environment for American Indians. The ACA resolution pledged to disseminate educational materials that highlight negative consequences of this practice, and encouraged members to work toward eliminating stereotypic American Indian images in institutions where they work (ACA, 2001). Emerging research has supported this resolution. Fryberg, Markus, Oyserman, and Stone (2008) examined the impact of Native-themed sports mascots on the psychological well-being of American Indian and White American students. The results indicate that, when exposed to Native-themed mascots, American Indian students reported significantly higher levels of depressed state self-esteem, lower levels of community worth, and fewer achievement related possible selves. The authors suggest that these stereotypic images remind American Indians of the narrow view society has of them, which threatens their psychological functioning and limits the possibilities they see for themselves (Fryberg et al., 2008). On the other hand, White American students reported higher levels of self-esteem after viewing images of Native-themed mascots, indicating a potentially insidious level of privilege enjoyed by majority culture participants whose culture is not subjected to the marginalizing process of racialized mascotery.

In another study, Steinfeldt and colleagues (in press) analyzed newspaper online forums from a community with a Native-themed sports nickname and logo. The results of their analysis indicated that a critical mass of online forum comments demonstrated ignorance about American Indian culture and disdain toward American Indians by perpetuating stereotypes, providing misinformation, and expressing overtly racist attitudes toward American Indians. When combined with the ACA (2001) resolution, these research findings suggest that stereotypic images of American Indians are not only psychologically impactful, these images are also widely disseminated through numerous institutions in society (e.g., schools, media, athletic events). This omnipresence of stereotypic images of American Indians in society (Merskin, 2001) creates the impression that these images must be acceptable (King et al., 2006).

This institutional mechanism creates a hegemonic effect that largely disallows a dialogue about the possibility that state-sanctioned practices (e.g., Columbus Day celebrations, public school sport teams with the nickname of *Indians*) could be considered racist, offensive, or harmful. According to MacNair-Semands (2007), “social justice is a dynamic issue which inevitably surfaces whenever people from diverse backgrounds meet in groups” (p. 62). Thus, school counselors have the opportunity to use the group process to facilitate healing experiences, rather than be complicit in allowing potentially damaging interactions to occur that fuel the perpetuation of oppression (MacNair-Semands, 2007).

Psycheducational group to address American Indian marginalization

While this group format is intended for use with middle-school-aged children, the principles of this group can be adapted more generally to many populations (e.g., other marginalized groups) and used with various age groups. The skills underlying social justice advocacy need to be socially constructed in a developmental manner, and the group experience may represent the

first time adolescents are able to discuss and process social justice issues with their classmates. This powerful process can lead to significant attitudinal change. Thus, adolescents who become more aware of their values during a group experience may feel more empowered to address social justice issues such as prejudice, discrimination, and oppression (Portman & Portman, 2002). The overarching goal of this group is to provide a forum for students to begin their journey of unlearning racism and equipping themselves with the tools to be agents of change. The proposed group is intended for all students, but it may be of greatest benefit to students from mainstream American culture, including but not limited to White American students. Many social injustices are unintentionally perpetuated by otherwise well-intentioned individuals in society (Bell & Griffin, 2007). Consciousness raising “involves a ‘process of transformative learning’ that awakens personal awareness, leads to critical self-reflection and analysis, discovers group commonality among a ‘class’ of situations” (Adams, 2007, p. 27). By attempting to raise consciousness and change attitudes among members of the mainstream culture, this proposed group has the potential to provide students with “knowledge [that] may empower them to recognize, identify, and positively change injustices as they begin to be advocates for social change in the 21st century” (Portman & Portman, 2002, p. 18).

Central to the success of this proposed psychoeducational group is the role of the leader. “Group facilitators who are unaware of their social privileges are particularly vulnerable to perpetuating the oppression of members from marginalized groups” (Smith & Shin, 2008, p. 359). Thus, as role models to students, multiculturally competent school counselors need to possess knowledge of the life experiences, cultural heritage, and historical background of people who are culturally different (AMCD, 2009). School counselors need to be aware of societal forms of oppression against American Indians because much of the daily clinical work done by

counselors is influenced by societal stereotypes of American Indians (Duran, 2006). School counselors should engage in critical self-inquiry about their knowledge, awareness, and skills as it relates to issues salient to American Indian culture. Many tribes have a cultural heritage preservation component (informal or formal), so school counselors should take the opportunity to reach out to members of the American Indian community to educate themselves.

In addition to the necessary multicultural competence of the leaders, it is important to acknowledge that it is sometimes difficult to receive initial support from a school's administration or community for social justice-themed groups. Introducing social injustice to students may be perceived as controversial, and "controversy is not something schools handle well" (Westheimer & Kahne, 1998, p. 19). Thus, it is important to build relationships and coalitions with administrators, teachers, and community members. Receiving institutional support for implementing a social justice-themed group may require school counselors to utilize this relational capital and engage in sustained efforts to educate the school community on the value of the topic at hand. To this end, the topic of American Indian marginalization is gaining increased attention in society, particularly among young students within classroom settings. In one example, fourth-grade students dressed up as characters from the 15th Century and conducted a mock trial, putting Christopher Columbus on the stand. The jury of students found Columbus guilty of misrepresenting the Spanish crown and thievery, and they sentenced him to life in prison (Associated Press, 2009). Along these lines, one idea to increase the school community's amenability to our proposed topic may be to plan this group to begin in October (i.e., around Columbus Day) and continue throughout the celebration of National American Indian and Alaska Native Heritage month in November. Additionally, this group could be implemented in coordination with a social studies curriculum unit on social justice. Although school counselors

have “a moral and ethical responsibility to advocate for students and serve as agents for social and political change” (Ratts, DeKruyf, & Chen-Hayes, 2007, p. 90), school counselors need to be conscientious of the social climate in the context in which they operate.

The proposed 8-week group involves four phases and represents a synthesis of aspects of the Empowering Students for Social Justice Model (Portman & Portman, 2002) within the framework of the Liberation Model (Steele, 2008). Both of these models have been introduced in the counseling literature, and both illuminate social justice advocacy principles that can be facilitated by school counseling. Table 1 illustrates how our proposed psychoeducational group can be structured. Each of the four phases has two sessions, with specific goals and content in each phase. Group dynamics relevant to each phase are also addressed, and examples of activities that can facilitate the process will be explained in detail in the sections that follow.

Phase I: Investigation and examination of social justice principles

In the first phase of this group, early experiences operate within the dynamics of the initial stage of group counseling. School counselors leading this group should focus on educating students about the group process, setting norms to create a safe environment to start discussing social justice issues, and conveying information about social justice principles (whether introduced for the first time or connected to a social studies curriculum on social justice). The two sessions in this phase, *Beginnings* and *Knowledge*, build a foundation and create a framework for students to begin to make sense of how they are internalizing societal representations of American Indians. In these sessions, group leaders can utilize the following framework for implementing social justice principles in the group process (Adams, 2007, p. 32): (a) balance the emotional and cognitive components of the learning process; (b) acknowledge and support the personal (individual student’s experience) while illuminating the systemic

(interactions among social groups); (c) attend to social relations within the group; (d) utilize reflection and experience as tools for student-centered learning; and (e) value awareness, personal growth, and change as outcomes of the learning process.

In the initial stage of this group, leaders need to teach members the basics of group process, help the group develop ground rules, and model facilitative dimensions of therapeutic behavior. Utilizing interventions such as supporting, modeling, and protecting (Morran, Stockton, & Whittingham, 2005), school counselors in this phase need to establish mutually agreed upon group norms for respectful interactions, encourage low-risk self-disclosure, and continually monitor and acknowledge affective responses as students begin their journey toward developing critical consciousness (Bell & Griffin, 2007). To achieve optimal functioning throughout these first two sessions, the group needs to create a safe environment where members are encouraged to share emerging feelings of defensiveness, dissonance, and discomfort that may accompany an exploration of oppression and marginalization in society (Griffin & Ouellett, 2007).

Phase II: Investigation/examination/deconstruction of societal narratives about American Indians

In the second stage, students are directed to pay closer attention to portrayals of American Indians in society. Doing so can help students become critical consumers of their own experiences, while providing ample opportunities for students to contribute to group discussions as group work in this transition stage progresses. It is important to know that psychoeducational groups can and often do become more affective as the group process continues (Stockton & Toth, 2000). Thus, school counselors in this phase need to be mindful of implementing interventions that attend to the affective climate of the group as students learn to work through conflict and confrontation while attempting to make sense of their societal observations. Leaders can facilitate group development by validating personal risk taking, encouraging full discussion,

and allowing contradictions and tensions to emerge (Bell & Griffin, 2007). While still observing the norms of respectful interactions set in the initial phase (and modeled by leaders throughout), students can use the group to share and process the reactions they have to their observations of societal portrayals of American Indians. Doing so can help facilitate perspectives that emerge from viewing the world with a more critical eye.

The goal of the two sessions of this second phase (i.e., *Learning and Unlearning History, Facilitating Perspectives*) is to investigate and critique dominant American narratives regarding American Indians. Students can be directed to examine institutions in contemporary society (e.g., media, schools, religion, commerce, government) for examples that perpetuate stereotypical portrayals of American Indians. For example, students can look in their history textbooks to examine the ways that American Indians are presented. According to Loewen (2008), American history textbooks utilize the word *savage* to describe American Indians while using *civilized* almost exclusively to describe White people, although anthropological research has demonstrated that American Indians had established a civilized way of life (e.g., agriculture, government, religion) before encounters with explorers (Loewen, 2008). Students can go shopping and observe products that appropriate American Indian culture (e.g., Land O' Lakes Butter, Jeep Cherokee, Big Chief Sugar; see Merskin, 2001). Additionally, students can observe contemporary media (i.e., internet, newspapers, television) to examine language used to describe American Indians. Newspaper headlines such as "Braves scalp D-backs" (Reuters, 2007) and "Lady Indians on the warpath" (Mitchell, 2009) utilize race-specific language that allows stereotypes of American Indians (i.e., bloodthirsty savage) to permeate and distort public perceptions of contemporary American Indian culture.

Phase III: Synthesis and application of findings

Utilizing the dynamics of the working stage of group counseling, the third phase allows students to identify and engage in a social justice project based on their experiences and findings in the first two phases of this group. The first session of this phase, *Synthesis and Planning*, allows each member to choose a social justice activity that the student can actually carry out. If social justice skills are to be fully developed, students need to have advocacy experiences that transform abstract concepts into concrete form (Westheimer & Kahne, 1998). In this phase, students can use the group process to explore possible advocacy ideas, and they will be encouraged to engage in a project based on whatever level of comfort they possess. For example, a student could join an activist discussion group (e.g., “Say NO to Mascots” on <http://www.yahoo.com>) that disseminates information daily on current events related to Native-themed mascots, nicknames, and logos. Tapping into the internet skills of many of today’s adolescents, a student could create a YouTube video that expresses a perspective highlighting the experience of American Indians subjected to societal marginalization (e.g., a parody on commercial products appropriating American Indian culture). Students could write a letter to FedEx, the naming-rights sponsor of the Washington *Redskins* football stadium, indicating consumer dissatisfaction and implications of their partnership with an organization with a racialized nickname and logo. There are many additional options students can explore as they prepare to be exposed to the action stage of social justice. Students can use the group to generate ideas and support for their activity as they begin to cultivate their emerging critical consciousness.

The second session of this phase, *Presenting Projects*, involves students describing the social justice activity they have chosen to engage in. Having completed their chosen activity, students will present a description of their activity so group members can share their reactions to these

social justice learning experiences. The group process can allow members to provide and receive feedback that can effectively validate their fledgling social justice experiences. Although rewarding, social justice advocacy can be a draining, exhausting, and isolating experience (H. Gunderson, personal communication, August 8, 2009). Thus, a cohesive working group can provide members with emotional support and validation, and the group experience can equip members with skills to develop support systems to draw upon in future social justice endeavors.

Phase IV: Future applications of social justice skills

In the final phase, dynamics of the termination stage of group counseling need to be addressed. Students continue to process their reactions to their own and fellow group members' social justice projects, and carry out the process of termination from the group. The goal of the penultimate session, *Processing Projective Applications of Project*, is to help students make a connection between what they have experienced in the group and what they can do in the future. In this session, group leaders can assist members in conceptualizing how they will apply the awareness, knowledge, and skills from this group to their life outside of group. Members can use this session to discuss how their experience with exploring American Indian marginalization relates to issues of oppression and marginalization that they have experienced or envision addressing in the future. By participating in this proposed group, students can build networks and coalitions, and share ways that they can support each other in becoming agents of change.

In the final session, *Termination*, students will continue to celebrate what they have learned and continue to explore how they are going to use this knowledge in the future. Students are encouraged to explicitly process the termination of the group. School counselors in this phase encourage members to articulate feelings they may have about the termination process, such as feelings of loss, shared appreciation, and unfinished business they may have with the group

(Stockton, Terry & Bhusumane, 2007). Given the transformative potential of this type of social justice group, it is important for leaders to validate the growth and development they notice among individual members and within the group as a whole. Students in this final phase can leave the group feeling good about themselves as contributing members of a participatory democracy (Westheimer & Kahne, 1998) who are beginning to realize how they can turn social justice awareness and knowledge into social justice skills.

Conclusion

Students need to be aware of social justice as a basic value (Portman & Portman, 2002). “Becoming aware of the various forms of cultural oppression and social injustices that adversely affect the mental health of clients from devalued groups in U.S. society as well as the psychological development of many Western-trained mental health practitioners is an essential component of the process of liberation psychology” (Duran et al., 2008, p. 289). This proposed group addresses the societal marginalization of American Indians as an example of how to apply social justice principles. The group experience can help students become empowered to address oppression, injustice, and marginalization across a variety of domains. In addition to cultivating students’ emerging social justice skills, this group format has the potential to help school counselors and other allied school professionals (e.g., teachers, administrators, coaches) familiarize themselves with issues salient to American Indian communities. “An increase in accurate information about Native Americans is viewed as necessary for the achievement of other goals such as poverty reduction, educational advancements, and securing treaty rights” (King et al., 2002, p. 392). Thus, the field of school counseling is uniquely positioned to address social justice issues that can empower students, teachers, counselors, and others who are interested in eliminating injustices in society.

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Table 1
Outline of psychoeducational group to address marginalization of American Indians

Phase	Group Sessions	Purpose (Goals)	Content (Activities)	Process
I. Investigation and Examination of Social Justice Principles	1. Beginnings 2. Knowledge	Create safe environment for students to share and explore social justice issues, provide foundation of knowledge on social justice	Familiarize members with group process, establish curative factors, connect to social justice principles in curriculum unit	Classroom dialogue, ice breaking, <i>Initial stage</i> group work
II. Investigation, Examination, and Deconstruction of Societal Narratives about American Indians	3. Learning and Unlearning History 4. Facilitating Perspectives	Investigate and critique dominant US cultural, educational and political narratives regarding American Indians	Critically examine and discuss history textbooks and sports media (newspapers, television, online columns, blogs), create scenarios to facilitate perspectives	Classroom dialogue, discourse analysis, <i>Transition stage</i> group work
III. Synthesis and Application of Findings	5. Synthesis and Planning 6. Presenting Projects	Define and study a problem based on themes discovered in Phase I and II, create presentations to share with fellow group members for feedback and support	Plan for social justice project, implement findings, create own unique format to present ideas to fellow students	Oral presentation, technology use, <i>Working stage</i> group work
IV. Future Applications of Social Justice Skills	7. Processing Projective Applications of Project 8. Termination	Develop action plan to address issues, facilitate connection of learning from group to external world, provide closure to group members	Provide feedback and support to fellow group members, discuss ways to implement social justice principles in future endeavors, terminate group process	Support building, networking, <i>Termination stage</i> group work