

21st Century Values Inherent in Effective Circles

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New Ways from Old Traditions

Entering the 21st century has brought many nations, and many cultures to the realization that there is a global community made of diverse people and diverse interests. These foundational cultures share essential human traits and, at times, common ancestral practices. The 21st Century is seeing intersections in many heretofore isolated fields of science, sharing discoveries and synthesizing new and significant ways to approach the brain, human interaction and well-being (Siegel, 2012). Derivatives and components of circle practices are now found in many well-established fields of health and human development including education, therapy, governance and justice (Greenleaf, et al.; Ross, 2008; Semple, Drouman, Reid, 2017; Tang & Leve, 2016). Many theories and findings emergent in neuro-biology, motivational psychology and sociology indirectly give credence to the human and social benefits of council. Circle communication can be seen as a healthy, communal and restorative practice.

In this era of fast paced technological advancement, cultural critics such as Richard Louv suggest people appear to be losing contact with the more natural and essential processes of interacting with each other and their environment in healthy ways (Louv, 2005). For many cultures, the practice of communicating in circles has historical precedence and ongoing value; it is a way to value their humanity and engage in relationship with the larger world. (Ross 2006, Zimmerman & Coyle 2009)

Traditional aboriginal circle practices are essentially structures that operate on both an individual and a communal level, “based on the belief that human beings are a part of nature, and health the result of holistic balance among body, mind, spirit, emotions, behavior and social group” (Greenleaf et al. 2017). In the practice of circle, individuals can discover the skills they require to be successful at understanding their own thoughts and feelings and how to communicate those thoughts and feelings to others. At the same time, each participant is called upon to listen deeply and to hear what others are saying. To apply this practice to a group encourages participants to listen for consensus. As long as participants adhere to the basic guidelines (Wallace, 2018), circles have the potential of creating safe spaces for growth, however a circle will only be as “effective” as the participants allow it to be. Circles are initiated on the assumption of willing and contributory participation. If participants disvalue the intentions and structures of council circles, then the outcomes will be negligible. When facilitators (“circle keepers”) are guided by core values, they provide the group with the direction they need in order to deepen the experience.

It is proposed that values practiced through council create both individual wellness and community cohesion. With the assumption that there are practices that an effective circle keeper develops, this paper will call upon current theory and research that helps define measures for each value. Although these four values are always holistically integrated in the total experience of a circle, they are divided (strictly theoretically) between the values that produce individual wellness and the values that promote community cohesion. This can help inform the search for valid tools of measurement.

Values of Individual Wellness

ATTENTION

Circles elicit a great deal of attention from participants. Enhanced interpersonal attentiveness and communication have been reported as outcomes of council practice (Dietsch, 2001). Speaking thoughtfully and succinctly is similar. In a circle, both speaking and listening can be done with a full awareness of self and others. As a reflective practice grounded in remaining present, much of the attention and focus exercised in council circle can be considered similar to mindfulness practice.

Mindfulness is a state that is typically described as “nonjudgmental attention to experiences in the present moment” (Kabat-Zinn, 1990). Bishop and colleagues include in their operational definition: “a quality of non-elaborative awareness to current experience and a quality to one’s experience within an orientation of curiosity, experiential openness and acceptance.” (Bishop et al. 2004) These are similar to the circle intentions to “listen and speak from the heart.” The benefits of mindfulness and its use in therapeutic interventions and education is well documented (Tang and Leve, 2016, Semple, Drouman, Reid, 2017). Many current practices of mindfulness adhere to its origin as a meditative discipline, however mindfulness is also encouraged as a daily practice “allowing the student to respond skillfully to situations that evoke emotional responses.” (Bishop et al. 2004). Unlike traditional introspective practices, circle mindfulness includes a focus on intra-personal *and* inter-personal experience and can provide numerous opportunities to respond skillfully to emotional evocation.

NARRATIVE

Humans seek meaning. Every individual has a running narrative about who they are and what their lives are about. These narratives become progressively more complex as people mature and are called upon to take on multiple roles. An individual's personal stories can have a powerful effect on how they interpret personal meaning (Seligman, 2011) and how they develop ownership and agency in their lives (Sokol et al., 2013). This may be why indigenous cultures consider a person's story sacred. Our beliefs contribute strongly to our sense of well-being. An individual's stories define their interactions with the world. As individuals move towards adulthood they can be empowered by a story that reconciles and consolidates all their roles into a meaningful whole. In adults, a healthy life narrative can be confirmed when stories reflect self-control, meaning, direction and resilience (Habbermas & Reese, 2015). Wenger defines a strong communal identity as one that has connectedness, expansiveness and effectiveness (Wenger, 2000). Healthy communities support the growth of their members. The circle concerns itself with each individual's personal story, it supports non-dialogic narrative sharing and stresses the importance of viewing each individual's developing story as a sacred part of the community. For many participants, this requires trust in the circle's confidentiality. The council circle practice provides opportunities for a group of individuals to suspend internal judgements and criticism, engage in active listening and consider varying viewpoints. In circle, participants don't judge or fix other people's stories, they accept and honor them. The positive and restorative effects of hearing others completely and being heard completely cannot be understated.

Values of community cohesion

ABUNDANCE

"It is when you give of yourself that you truly give." Gibran

Learning to express gratitude is an exceptional practice for wellbeing (Seligman, 2011). However, recognizing abundance involves more than expressing gratitude. It is a growth mindset (Dweck, 2016) that recognizes competencies (both in self and others) and that pursues reciprocal empowerment. In a world of dwindling resources, it may seem counter-intuitive to focus on recognizing abundance, yet only humans with abundant reciprocal competencies will have the vision to resolve such issues.

Circles offer disassociated participants a chance to establish reciprocal authentic disclosure with one another. Sharing immediate personal stories in a circle is often a great act of bravery and generosity. Collins, in a meta-analysis on the nature of disclosure, confirmed that opening up to others can increase likability and the likelihood of reciprocity (Collins & Miller, 1994). Circles offer an opportunity to demonstrate goodwill and trust through listening and sharing stories. When the intention of being open-hearted and non-judgmental is applied to sharing personal stories, powerful personal transformations are possible. Positive emotions (such as those of being valued) increase the number of options individuals can recognize in their field of attention (Fredrickson & Branigan, 2005). Note that in a circle this valuation requires nothing more than listening to another person's input.

Circles can build up individuals and communities. Circles can help participants define and strengthen a living culture. For any number of reasons, our large-scale, institutional and technologically-driven culture can leave its members feeling undervalued and isolated (McKnight & Block, 2010). By defining themselves, members contribute more to a learning community (Wenger, 2000). With repeated opportunities for sharing, communities become proficient at recognizing the "tenants of abundance" (McKnight & Block, 2010):

- What we have is enough
- We have the capacity to provide what we need in the face of the human condition
- We organize our world in the context of cooperation and satisfaction
- We are responsible for each other
- We live with the reality of the human condition

Circle Keepers develop the ability to recognize potential in others and demonstrate faith in each participant's potential. This is a noteworthy trait of leadership. Rather than creating limitations and boundaries for people's expression, circle keepers demonstrate eager receptivity for each participant's contribution. By expressing gratitude in the face of shared human predicaments, circle keepers help communities increase trust in their collective competencies and social efficacy.

INTERRELATEDNESS

Many definitions of interrelatedness cast the concept as a metaphysical abstraction or theoretical construct of quantum physics. Interrelatedness within circles is experiential. It is a reciprocal, visceral, synergistic relation of humankind's relationship with one another and with nature. Interrelatedness is foremost a relationship between two or more beings or experiences. While there is mindful attention inward, participants also have the opportunity to “decenter” (Jackson, Meltzoff & Decety, 2005) and experience each other reciprocally. “It is only when people suspend judgement that they can be free to take on the perspective of the other” (Watson & Greenberg, 2009).

Becoming conscious of interrelatedness begins with adhering to the intentions of circle, listening and speaking from the heart (Wallace, 2018). Things that co-exist have relationship. Interrelatedness is visceral when the neural circuitry involved in social interaction overlaps with that which regulates visceral responses. The meaningful connections people perceive with one another in circles can be *felt* after the creation of a safe and supportive space. Some theorists propose mammalian brains are viscerally evolved for enhanced empathy (Carter, et al. 2009). Through shared narrative and empathetic connections participants learn about synergy, they intuit relational insights and feel responses to very human conditions. Circles verify the adage “the whole is greater than the sum of its parts” (Michaelson, Watson, Black, 1989).

The research and theories of Stephen Porges help to illustrate how safe spaces contribute to the necessary “co-regulation” of the parasympathetic nervous system which is key to our health (Porges, 2017). While institutionally it may appear necessary for individuals to “self-regulate” their nervous systems to hierarchical expectations, more importantly humans need to find value through co-regulation with one another. Institutional practices that create barriers to co-regulation will be short-lived. Not surprisingly, evaluations around the use of circle practices identify institutional structures, like time or prescribed schedules, as challenges (Dietsch, 2001, Grahamslaw & Henson, 2015). The natural world can present humankind with time on a grander and more humbling scale. Co-regulation with the natural environment has been cited as beneficial to human health. Studies on the relationship between nature and wellbeing have repeatedly found that nature positively affects cognitive, psychological, social and physical well-being (Greenleaf et al.; Kaplan, 1995; Louv, 2008; Siegel, 2012).

Indigenous traditions experience interrelatedness as sacred. Humankind's self-importance is seen as sustaining the illusionary division between man and the rest of nature (Ross 2006). The belief that inter-relatedness is “sacred” may be an acknowledgement that *judgement* (which is an attribute reserved for a Creator) is detrimental to human perceptions of interrelatedness. Each person's story is a part of a greater story and must be honored as such.

Next Steps

The author has explored several interrelated values that are inherent to successfully “keeping” a circle: attention, narrative, abundance and interrelatedness. There is evidence that a number of “effective practices” researched in other fields may have been engendered in traditional talking circles. This paper, therefore, asserts that circles constitute a research-based practice, with a collaborative body of evidence. Tools to measure circle effectiveness can be constructed by measuring the presence or absence of structural elements (Wallace, 2018) in correlation to the concurrence of the proposed individual and communal values suggested in this paper.

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