

12-1-2010

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Recommended Citation

Schermer, T. W. (2010). Wen-Wu in Counseling with Men, *Michigan Journal of Counseling*, 37(2), 13-17. doi:10.22237/mijoc/1291161720

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Wen-Wu in Counseling with Men

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Abstract

Wen-wu is a Chinese conceptualization of masculinity that strikes a balance between wen (i.e., literary strength) and wu (i.e., physical strength). This concept can be readily applied to a mental health setting when working with male clients. The present treatise outlines the concept of wen-wu and provides suggestions for use in clinical work. Applying this concept in counseling promotes the construction of wellness plans and facilitates discussions about masculinity.

Wen-Wu in Counseling with Men

Men do not attend mental health treatment at the same rate as women (Prior, 1999; Vessey & Howard, 1993). Scholars have suggested that men are not attracted to mental health counseling because it does not honor a masculine way of being (e.g., Brooks, 1998; Wexler, 2009). Mental health counseling typically emphasizes that clients share their feelings, explore their problems, admit their vulnerabilities, and utilize a client-counselor relationship for change (Robertson & Fitzgerald, 1992). Traditional masculine ways of being often profers incongruent qualities such as restricting emotions, establishing superiority, showing strength, and being independent (Levant & Kopecky, 1995).

Masculine ways of interacting and sharing frequently emphasize a physically active orientation (e.g., Brooks, 2010; Glicken, 2005; Kiselica, 2005; Rabinowitz & Cochran, 2002). Mental health counselors may need to honor this way of being in session in order to better facilitate some men's counseling experience. The present treatise is one approach to taking a more active orientation towards counseling by challenging men to conceptualize their health through the Chinese concept of *wen-wu*. This application is not meant to define treatment with men, rather to shape early interactions and facilitate deeper dialogs later in counseling.

Wen-Wu

Traditional Chinese depictions of masculinity have highlighted the balance between wen and wu (Louie, 2002; 2003; Louie & Edwards, 1994). This is

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a conceptualization of masculinity that roughly translates to English to mean wen, literary/civil/mental, and wu, martial/physical. According to Louie, this concept is most prevalent in China but is reflected in most East Asian cultures. Wen-wu encompasses a duality of mental and physical attainment in masculinity and serves to honor both scholar and soldier as being equally masculine. Louie noted that at one time, having a balance between these two elements might have been as desirable as having one or the other present. The context would have dictated what was needed most, but both elements were considered an acceptable expression of manhood.

Education is the most common representation of wen, which is supposed to depict the strength of mind and civility that an individual possesses. Louie (2003) noted that in East Asian countries many political leaders emphasize their educational attainments to depict their worthiness for leadership. In contrast to wen, wu is oriented towards physical strength and is sometimes tied to the martial arts. Louie noted that many American politicians will distance themselves from their education (wen) and gravitate towards their action-oriented pursuits (e.g., hunting, sports; i.e., wu). This is an example of how Westernized conceptualizations of masculinity tend to prioritize a wu-type of masculine strength, even in contexts when they are not intuitively desirable. When applying these concepts to counseling, the emphasis is placed on balancing these elements rather than having one supersede the other.

Applying Wen-Wu

The first step in using wen-wu with male clients is to introduce the concept in session. Most people are familiar enough with yin-yang that it can serve as a useful comparison. Both yin-yang and wen-wu are dualities that reflect a balance or harmony of forces. Informing the client about this balance between the “scholar” and the “warrior” or the “mind” and the “body” provides a foundation for additional discussion. Also noting how counseling will require wen and wu elements can help frame the counseling process. Early on in counseling, this framework might also facilitate a sense of structure for men who might feel especially vulnerable during initial meetings.

The second step is to help break down the two elements and generate examples of how clients are actively living out these qualities of wen and wu. For example, a man might highlight an interest in history as a wen activity and trail running as a wu activity. Developing a picture of how these forces are already being engaged can help increase a client’s sense of agency early in treatment. Additionally, spend time exploring a client’s goals for expanding wen and wu in their lives. At this phase, it can be helpful to think big and allow clients to freely explore their ideas for both areas. Examples of strengthening wen might include activities such as pursuing educational goals (e.g., taking a class, pursuing a degree, reading about a topic of interest), increasing emotional awareness (e.g., journaling, reading self-help materials), or engaging in discussion with others (e.g., local interest groups). Examples of strengthening wu might include exercising (e.g., playing a sport, running), learning a form of martial arts (e.g., kung-fu, karate, tai chi), or engaging in a physical hobby (e.g., fishing, hunting, sculpting).

The third step is creating a plan for achieving the established goals. The client can weigh his wen and wu lists to see which one requires strengthening to move towards balance. He can choose either a wen or wu goal and work towards achieving that goal. Addis and Martell (2004) outlined some of the steps for setting useful goals. They suggested (a) establishing small steps for attaining goal, (b) establishing a logical sequence of steps, (c) address the specifics of *when* and *how* the steps will be taken, (d) anticipate and prepare for barriers to emerge during the process, and (e) create some form of reward for accomplishing each step or goal.

The final step is when clients begin implementing their plans. Early on in implementation, clients might feel a sense of success just by completing some of their steps. Highlighting these small successes is a way to begin building self-efficacy that will contribute to increased self-esteem (Smith, 2006). Continuing to link these behaviors to the wen-wu balance can help facilitate discussions of masculinity in session. This is often a starting point for a more comprehensive discussion about masculinity and about how men want to be in the world. Thereby deepening the counseling process with men.

Clinical Experience

In my own clinical experience I have found the concept of wen-wu to be very helpful in facilitating several important therapeutic insights. First, men begin to see the importance of creating balance in their behaviors to achieve wellness. Wellness is often equated with physicality, however the wen-wu balance provides a more comprehensive picture. Second, men start to set goals that are oriented towards wellness with the understanding that they are becoming the best men that they can become. Linking masculinity to mental health change can have a catalyzing impact on men (Real, 1997). Finally, this is helpful way to catalyze a dialog in session surrounding men's issues. Many scholars have suggested that counseling with men needs to focus on masculinity in order to be effective (e.g., Silverberg, 1986; Rabinowitz & Cochran, 2002). By using wen-wu in session, I have found that men are more open to discussing what it is like being a man than if I broach the subject without the same prompting.

I have only applied wen-wu to individual counseling with male clients. However, there are additional applications that could be useful when working with male clients. Most notably, group counseling settings could benefit from incorporating wen-wu. Whether in therapeutic or psycho-educational groups, the concept of wen-wu could provide a simple yet comprehensive framework to construct a program for change. Similarly to the individual setting, a discussion about masculinity may be facilitated by first discussing wen-wu.

Implications for Future Research

The use of wen-wu in counseling with male clients is based on my own clinical experience. As such, there are several opportunities to assess the usefulness of this construct. First, counselors who utilize this construct could participate in a Q sort about its application. This may elucidate some of the different approaches to using wen-wu in session. Second, qualitative research could be

conducted to examine the views of clients who have experienced using wen-wu in session. This might indicate whether or not they found the concept helpful in meeting their goals for counseling. Finally, as a wellness oriented construct this could be compared with other wellness models in applicability with male clients. While other models may be more comprehensive, wen-wu might offer something unique to male clients.

In summary, utilizing the concept of wen-wu in session is not intended to be the whole of treatment with men. Rather it is a useful tool for framing discussions of wellness and masculinity. Some men might find it a masculine friendly way to begin a therapeutic relationship. As men become more comfortable with the counseling relationship, they may be able to embrace other ways of being in session with another person. As such, counselors may be able to move away from the structure that wen-wu offers and delve into the client's more unique stories of masculinity.

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