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Author

Gomez-Bailón, Brissa Marina

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Literature Review: A Review of Decolonizing Frameworks and Culturally Centered Treatments in Indigenous Psychology

Brissa Marina Gomez-Bailón

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Literature Review: A Review of Decolonizing Frameworks and Culturally Centered Treatments in Indigenous Psychology

Brissa Marina Gomez-Bailón

Department of Psychology, University of California, Merced

Writing 101: Writing in the Disciplines Psychology

Professor Phillip Lovas

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Abstract

Psychology as a discipline has been historically shaped by Western ideologies and overrepresented by Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic (WEIRD) populations. This over-representation results in a narrow and culturally biased understanding of mental health, marginalizing Indigenous and non-Western perspectives. The dominance of "whiteness" in psychology, in which Western norms are treated as universals, fails to account for the diverse cultural, spiritual, and communal frameworks of Indigenous populations. This paper explores Indigenous psychology as a necessary response to this imbalance, emphasizing the decolonization of psychological practices and the implementation of culturally centered treatments. Drawing on global Indigenous movements, it highlights the significance of reconnecting with traditional knowledge systems, holistic and collectivist models of well-being, and culturally rooted healing practices. Case studies such as the Māori philosophy of *Hauora*, community-led workshops in Canada, and the National Empowerment Project in Australia demonstrate the efficacy of culturally grounded approaches in addressing historical trauma and promoting mental health. Ultimately, the paper argues for a reimagining of psychological practice that prioritizes Indigenous epistemologies, supports cultural revitalization, and seeks justice and healing for historically marginalized communities.

Key words: Indigenous; psychology; decolonization; holistic; culturally centered

Literature Review: A Review of Decolonizing Frameworks and Culturally Centered Treatments in Indigenous Psychology

Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic (WEIRD) populations have been historically dominated and over-represented in research, theories, and frameworks in psychology (Muthukrishna et al., 2020). The term "WEIRD" was created to characterize such groups employed in psychological studies. The dependence on WEIRD populations in psychology creates issues, as these populations are not an accurate representation of the world at large. Problems arise when the results of studies with a focus on WEIRD populations are generalized and applied to the rest of the world. The reliance on WEIRD populations results in a lackluster amount of studies that focus on ethnicity, race, and culture, and even less so for Indigenous populations.

The overrepresentation of WEIRD populations and the underrepresentation of Indigenous and non-Western populations causes an effect of whiteness in psychology. "Whiteness" refers to how typical Western psychology makes a white person the standard of health in psychological studies (Smith et al., 2023), regardless of a person's cultural, ethnic, or racial background; this means many minority groups and Indigenous populations are overlooked within research. Typical Western psychological frameworks emphasize individualism, neglecting collectivism and holistic teachings that minority and Indigenous peoples are more accustomed to (Humphrey & Bliuc, 2021). This causes negative effects on their health and well-being, as what might be considered healthy for a minority or Indigenous population could be seen as unhealthy under the definition of "whiteness."

Indigenous psychology combats this, making a new psychology that is set within a specific cultural context (Allwood & Berry, 2006). This is accomplished by focusing on factors

of Indigenous populations, such as looking into values, beliefs, histories, and practices of Indigenous populations. In other words, Indigenous psychology is a psychological movement that tries to distance itself from typical Western psychological ideas and frameworks that have been historically dominant in the Western psychological field. This is done by attempting to decolonize psychology and bring forth culturally sensitive treatments directed at Indigenous populations. Indigenous psychology gives voice to overlooked Indigenous peoples and their struggles by being mindful of their history, values, beliefs, and practices.

Literature Review

What all Indigenous communities worldwide have in common is a shared experience of colonialism and living through its often traumatic aftermath (González et al., 2022). American Indigenous and Alaskan Native (AIAN) populations, for example, faced forced relocation, disease, famine, religious boarding schools, genocide, and mass death under European and American colonizers (Baciu et al., 2017; Ciofalo et al., 2022). These populations now disproportionately suffer more from mental health disorders like depression, suicide, substance abuse, and PTSD, stemming from what is called historical trauma. Historical trauma is better defined as the multigenerational psychological and emotional injury resulting from traumatic events (González et al., 2022).

Typical Western psychology often upholds the values and views of colonizing populations; it perpetuates the idea of "whiteness," and underrepresents and marginalizes Indigenous communities and their experiences. While Western psychology has the potential to help many populations, in this instance, it was created and shaped by harmful and oppressive historical forces, making it unfit for Indigenous communities. In other words, Western psychology is the psychology of the oppressors, so it is inapplicable to Indigenous communities,

as they have been on the receiving end of oppression. The invalidation of Indigenous experiences and neglect of cultural and historical factors are detrimental to healing, as they lead to irrelevant health recommendations and inapplicable research results.

Movements to decolonize psychology combat just that. They advocate for separating Indigenous mental health practices from colonial frameworks and reclaiming traditional beliefs, practices, and values (Grant et al., 2022). Colonization and oppressive forces have brought significant pain to Indigenous communities, so a psychology that is rooted in the same ideologies that once sought to harm and eradicate Indigenous populations will not be able to aid or cure current health ailments. Reconnection to cultural roots, such as community ceremonies, oral traditions, and land-based healing, offers pathways for both psychological and spiritual recovery (Auger et al., 2016).

Indigenous Frameworks

An example of decolonization in psychology is Indigenous populations returning and reconnecting with traditional frameworks and ways of thought. This process involves relearning, implementing, and exploring cultural practices and knowledge systems, factors of their culture that had once been lost. Ceremonial practices, traditional clothing, food, medicine, languages, and dances are examples of factors that, when rediscovered and relearned, help Indigenous communities decolonize themselves and psychology. Since these factors are embedded in Indigenous epistemologies, rediscovering, understanding, and integrating these elements into daily life can empower Indigenous communities (King et al., 2017). This helps them heal from the impacts of historical trauma and reclaim their narratives in the field of psychology.

Another example of decolonization in psychology and promoting indigenous frameworks would be promoting collectivist and holistic approaches to well-being within Indigenous

populations. Collectivist well-being emphasizes the health and harmony of the community, including relationships with family, extended kin, and broader social networks (González et al., 2022). Holistic well-being goes beyond mental health, encompassing physical, spiritual, and emotional health, while also addressing the relationship between humans and the natural world (Ciofalo et al., 2022).

Collectivist and Holistic Well-Being

Indigenous psychologies are rooted in a strong emphasis on community and interconnectedness, centering well-being on relationships not only with other people, but also with nonhuman animals, nature, and the land itself (Ciofalo et al., 2022). This perspective contrasts with typical Western psychology, which often prioritizes individualism and overlooks the influence of environmental and social contexts (Humphrey & Bliuc, 2021). Establishing frameworks that are focused on community and interconnectedness benefits Indigenous communities more than Western frameworks that focus on individuality. Collectivist and holistic frameworks are two of the most common types of frameworks that do just that; they focus on community and interconnectedness.

An example of collectivist teaching in an Indigenous population is seen in the Maori philosophy of *Hauora*. It defines well-being as a culturally dynamic, relational, and biopsychosocial state (Ciofalo et al., 2022). *Hauora* works by dividing well-being into four pillars: spiritual connectedness, emotional well-being, physical well-being, and social connections. When one of these pillars is not stable, *Hauora* is not fully achieved (Te Whatu Ora, 2023). *Hauora* helps create a sense of belonging and identity within the Maori population, as it reinforces social bonds and ensures that healing is not an isolated endeavor but a collective process.

Another example of holistic teaching in the Indigenous population is seen in Canada. Holistic-based workshops aimed at promoting traditional healthcare practices were implemented in local Indigenous communities (Auger et al., 2016). These holistic workshops helped to increase feelings of autonomy in their respective Indigenous populations and overall access to healthcare. This was because the workshops were not only holistic in nature, but they were also community-led and implemented culturally relevant information and ceremonies, such as land acknowledgements. In doing so, these holistic workshops promote community in their Canadian Indigenous populations.

Indigenous psychologies rooted in collectivist and holistic frameworks are more beneficial for these communities than Western psychology, as they cater to the needs and ideologies of these Indigenous communities. Maori *Hauora* philosophy and Canada's Indigenous workshops are examples of collectivist and holistic frameworks being relearned or implemented in their respective Indigenous community that have had successful outcomes. These are examples of Indigenous communities decolonizing aspects of their life and returning to more traditional ways of thought in psychology. Access to traditional frameworks enhances health and health ownership for Indigenous community members and does so more effectively than Western psychology and frameworks (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008).

Culturally Centered Treatments

Along with movements to decolonize the psychological field, Indigenous psychologies also promote having culturally centered treatments. Indigenous communities have been overlooked in many aspects of social, healthcare, government, and infrastructure movements, which has left these communities underdeveloped. These neglects contribute to historical trauma, which in turn contributes to poor health outcomes for Indigenous communities. Indigenous

communities suffer much discrimination in medical facilities. About one in five Native Americans claim to have experienced discrimination in a clinical setting (Findling et al., 2019). This causes fear and mistrust in existing Western healthcare treatment facilities and their practices in psychology. Culturally sensitive and centered treatments complement decolonizing psychology, as they attempt to distance themselves from the typical Western ways and return to a more traditional way of doing so.

An example of culturally centered treatments is the National Empowerment Project (NEP). This is an Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led movement focused on promoting cultural, social, and emotional well-being within these Indigenous communities (Ciofalo et al., 2022). This is done by working directly with these communities in order to address issues impacting mental health, with goals to reduce mental health problems through community-driven strategies and culturally centered treatments (Queensland Government, 2017).

Another example of culturally centered treatments is Canadian Indigenous communities' integrated traditional ceremonies that help treat issues like trauma and substance use (Rowan et al., 2015). These ceremonies take steps to strengthen and rebuild community relationships and reconnect spiritual identity. The ceremonies include activities such as traditional prayer, burning of sacred plants, smudging, and sweat lodging. The ceremonies allow for reflection and reconnection with cultural and spiritual traditions and identities. They allow Indigenous populations to find and ground themselves within their traditions and health with culturally centered treatments.

Culturally centered treatments are not only a response to the mistrust resulting from discrimination, but also a challenge to the dominance of Western psychology. Culturally centered treatments and decolonizing psychology work together to distance themselves from Western

ways and return to a more traditional way of doing things. They acknowledge Indigenous knowledge and struggles, prioritize community-led approaches, and offer culturally centered treatments for mental health.

Effectiveness of Decolonization and Culturally Centered Treatments

Movements to decolonize psychology and implement culturally centered treatments have proven effective in addressing the mental health needs of Indigenous communities. These approaches work to address the limitations of Western psychological frameworks, which often invalidate Indigenous experiences and neglect cultural and historical factors essential for healing. By reclaiming traditional beliefs, practices, and values, decolonization offers Indigenous populations pathways to psychological recovery that resonate with their lived realities and cultural heritage.

Impact of Decolonization

Decolonization in psychology reconnects Indigenous communities with their cultural roots. This allows for healing through traditional practices and frameworks, as Western frameworks focus on independence, which is not a valued framework in Indigenous communities (Humphrey & Bliuc, 2021). The Maori philosophy of *Hauora* defines well-being through interconnected pillars of spiritual, emotional, physical, and social health, fostering community unity and holistic recovery. Holistic workshops in Canadian Indigenous communities have enhanced health autonomy by integrating cultural ceremonies and community-led initiatives. Movements and initiatives like these provide culturally meaningful methods to address historical trauma and its lingering effects. These approaches validate Indigenous epistemologies and prioritize collective well-being over individualistic frameworks. This aligns better with Indigenous values and promotes sustainable healing. Having an understanding of Indigenous

frameworks and knowledge allows for healthy and successful lives within Indigenous populations (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008). For example, when attending culturally centered schooling, Indigenous students had more engagement, better classroom management, and achieved academically at higher rates compared to Indigenous students without culturally centered schooling (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008).

Benefits of Culturally Centered Treatments

Culturally centered treatments complement decolonization efforts by addressing Indigenous populations' mistrust of Western medical systems and creating interventions to implement Indigenous views of psychology and healthcare. Programs such as the National Empowerment Project in Australia emphasize culturally driven, community-led mental health strategies, reducing stigma and fostering social and emotional well-being. In Canada, the use of traditional ceremonies, such as traditional prayer and the burning of sacred plants, has helped Indigenous populations reconnect with spiritual identities and heal from trauma. These practices are particularly effective because they prioritize Indigenous agency and cultural specificity, fostering a sense of empowerment and trust among community members.

The decolonization of psychology and the implementation of culturally centered treatments are impactful for Indigenous mental health. They challenge oppressive frameworks, validate Indigenous knowledge systems, and create pathways for cultural healing. With these elements, Indigenous communities are not only addressing the effects of historical trauma but also reclaiming their identities and establishing self-determined approaches to well-being.

Implications

The literature shows that Indigenous psychology takes significant steps to separate itself from Western psychological views and frameworks, as Western psychological methods have not

been effective in addressing the unique mental health needs of Indigenous communities. This separation happens through decolonization, in both the field and the frameworks, and the development of culturally centered treatments that prioritize Indigenous worldviews, traditions, and values.

These efforts have important implications for how mental health research and practices should be approached. They stress the necessity of being more inclusive to improve the effectiveness of psychological treatments and frameworks. Including Indigenous voices in the creation, implementation, and evolution of mental health services will benefit Indigenous communities. Without the inclusivity of Indigenous voices and culturally centered care, Indigenous communities will continue to experience systemic neglect, mistrust of services, and poor mental health outcomes. These models encourage a holistic and collectivist understanding of well-being that takes into account interconnectedness, community, and the greater environment, and gives alternative pathways to healing that Western psychology overlooks. Ultimately, what the literature shows is a need for broader institutional change. Healthcare systems, academic institutions, and government agencies need to reflect on their reliance on Western frameworks and models and create space to implement Indigenous epistemologies. Western frameworks and models overlook minority groups and neglect historical traumas that hurt Indigenous communities. Supporting Indigenous psychology is not just about inclusion, but also about justice, healing, and maintaining cultural identity and autonomy.

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