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Sharing the light of the sacred fire: A proposal for a paradigm shift in psychology

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Cover Page Footnote
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Introduction

Psychology developed when Western assumptions including anthropomorphic (human centered) beliefs about creation and humanity's place at the top of its hierarchy, and that ideal healthy human behavior assumed individualism, independence, and autonomy. As an example, the founder of psychology in the U.S., William James, was trained in western medicine and recognized as a major figure in western philosophy, belief systems that contributed heavily to his understanding of the new science of psychology and its focus on empiricism and humanism (e.g., James, 1912). In addition, perhaps out of necessity, psychology defined itself as a science differently than the disciplines of biology, sociology, anthropology, and philosophy resulting in a silo mentality about its place in science and practice.

In recent times, basic Western paradigm assumptions about the value of individualism, independence, and autonomy have been challenged. Environmental sciences have found Mother Earth to be a closed interconnected system with limited resources. Major global challenges have been identified (overpopulation [United States Census Bureau, 2013], global warming [National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, 2013], overfishing [Worm et al., 2006], and shortages of potable water and food [United Nations, 2013]) that are potentially preventable and modifiable, since they are the direct result of human choices. Health issues, such as stress, obesity, substance abuse, also the result of human choices and potentially modifiable, have become global concerns (e.g., World Health Organization, 2009). Since these problems do not respect cultural boundaries or discipline specific silos, they represent significant challenges to psychologists who are most comfortable with interventions designed for one on one or small group formats. These challenges were better be understood and addressed with more holistic understanding of the issues and use of trans-disciplinary approaches to science that allow scientists from many disciplines to work together, including those from psychology. Vine Deloria (1979) may have been the first to suggest the value of breaking down silos via use of Indigenous models and trans-disciplinary model.

Some would argue (from the current paradigm) that psychology has no business intervening on environmental problems, for example, or that large group science should be left to sociologists and anthropologists. However, the global concerns described above are the result of individual choices, potentially modifiable, and psychology is the science that best understands how to intervene on human behavior even if the problems and their solutions do not match well with the existing paradigm of psychological science. So although psychology alone cannot address these issues, it needs to be at the table with the many other sciences (environmental or otherwise) because of psychology's expertise on how to understand and address human behavior and its consequences. And certainly some agree that it is the business of psychology as a discipline to address broad issues such as climate change as demonstrated in the

white paper on the topic (American Psychological Association Task Force on the Interface between Psychology and Global Climate Change, 2009).

Western ideas such as individualism without community concern, focusing on the discrete without concern for the whole, and autonomy without concern for the necessity of collaboration and sharing, have contributed to the global challenges described above. So although radical individualism and autonomy, as examples, may have appeared functional when psychology first developed, new information from science has shown those assumptions to be flawed. On the other hand, Indigenous beliefs that are more collective and communal in orientation are more closely aligned with the global realities faced today.

Discussion

Although excellent blueprints exist for defining Indigenous Psychology for Indigenous people (e. g., Duran & Duran, 1995), and individual psychologists have used Indigenous methods in their scholarship and practice, I am proposing that we share the wisdom from our collective heritages and traditions to change the discipline of psychology in order to better address the concerns expressed above. Others have been interested in the compatibility of Indigenous ways of thinking and new scientific knowledge, such as from the point of view of cosmology and physical sciences (Duran, 2013), and now it would be helpful to use many sources to redefine psychological science and how it relates to other sciences to address the problems and concerns described earlier. A helpful example might be how Indian Health Services improved its services by recognizing traditional cultural healing practices as valid treatment in addition to providing western medical practices.

However, Deloria (1995) pointed out the folly of believing in science as an end-all explanation for all things, and indeed, I am not proposing that we give away our sacred fires, but rather, that we share our insights from generations of Indigenous people who have studied creation and our place in it; sharing the light from the fires rather than the fires themselves. The intent is to reform science rather than compromise our traditions. I propose eight different ways to improve psychology as a science and practice to make it more effective to address the current realities that have been discussed.

Cyclical rather than linear psychology. The old paradigm suggests that progress is positive and linear but that belief is inconsistent with an Indigenous worldview (Fixico, 2003) and with the ups and downs of behavior change and the seasons of our lives. Waves are important in the universe: light, sound, and human behavior seem to travel through time like waves. Symmetry and homeostasis (nature seeking balance and harmony) are found consistently throughout creation. And interestingly, human growth seems to occur more frequently as a result of the down cycles, or traumas (this idea from Daniel Foster, 2013, personal communication, during the question and comment period of the talk), than when things are going well. Cycles are part of the education we call life, and the cycles capture the apparent duality of life (this idea also from Daniel Foster, 2013, personal communication).

Life as a lesson psychology. In the current psychological paradigm, there is a great deal of importance placed on outcomes. However, what has been lost is the importance of process. Indigenous people believe in the orderly unfolding of life, and that there is meaning and purpose in the process of living and in the understanding of relationships (Fixico, 2003). Life as a lesson psychology focuses on what does this moment teach us, and since life is a continuing story, the process is at least as important as the discrete outcomes along the way.

Individuality with communal goals psychology. History is a lesson of how individuality without others in mind is destructive. Individuality without purpose often leads to relationships with things (e.g., material goods, substances, food, etc.) rather than with people or nature. Indigenous beliefs about the importance of community and responsibility to the whole rather than to the individual are more aligned with addressing the serious global challenges mentioned above. However, I am not naïve enough to believe that we can suddenly overturn the individualism that permeates our society. Therefore the focus is on improving individualism by adding social responsibility as a goal for individual behavior, leading to real and sustaining human progress. The goal of individual behavior is to build a sustainable legacy.

Timelessness and meaning in the moment psychology. Time is a great mystery. Psychology has shown us that our present behavior is influenced by past behavior and beliefs about future outcomes. When people engage in behavior change, for example, it not only impacts present behavior, but also future behavior. However, people also reinterpret their pasts in light of personal change. In reality, past, present, and future are changed with psychological interventions, a reality that closely aligns with an Indigenous view of human impact on past and future. Psychology would benefit from a paradigm shift that accounts for the timeliness of human impact, and the responsibility that arises from that timeliness.

Collaboration psychology. Global problems can only be solved by collaboration across ideologies, boundaries, and between people who may be traditional enemies. Collaboration rather than non-collaborative competition is the path to a sustainable world. The goal of competition becomes to enhance Mother Earth and improve collaboration rather than for selfish goals.

Sustainable psychology. Many people have behaved as if this generation was the most important to ever live on the planet, which suggests a certain level of psychopathology perhaps rooted in the assumptions of the current paradigm. Indigenous values, on the other hand, suggest that individual behavior be carried out with concern for other's needs. How can we live in a way that allows others to live? How can we live in a way that respects all we impact; in the past, present, and future? Under the model of sustainable psychology, people act with the assumption that any action is likely to have broad consequences across space and time, like the ripples on a lake.

Holistic psychology. Life, physical, and behavioral sciences have all demonstrated that parts of the universe are often interconnected, inseparable, and basically meaningless when studied as discrete entities. The whole is often much more complex and functional than the sum of each individual part. An example is the archaic belief that humans were somehow discrete organisms that exist in a void, but now we know that humans are a collection of organisms working together, and humans get very ill if they lose too many of their microbe partners (Wolfe, January, 2013). Indigenous people understand that there is mystery, awe, and wonder in the wholeness of creation that may not been seen if one examines discrete units. Holistic psychology accounts for mystery, awe, and wonder in ways that psychology under the present paradigm cannot. Psychology used to more holistic as a discipline but has become increasingly compartmentalized (specialized) overtime. It is important to understand that relationships are potentially more important than differences and individual units when studying human

Sacred psychology. So with this suggestion, I am not proposing religiosity but rather a belief that all things are important to the purposes of the universe. Secular sciences, including psychology, inadvertently diminished the value of sacredness in creation. Indigenous people believe that everything has an important role to play in creation. Hierarchies are undermined when all things are considered sacred. Hierarchical beliefs are central to the current paradigm and contribute to anthropocentric (human centered) behavior. Chaos theory from physical science has suggested that randomness is likely a myth and that all things are connected across space and time even if they cannot be currently predicted or understood. Believing in the sacredness and importance of all things in the universe also creates a positive view of all aspects of creation and a strong ethical responsibility to walk gently though life in avoid harming the sacredness (and its order).

Summary and Conclusion

The goal of this particular paper is to generate discussion of how Indigenous ideas may help to improve psychological science and its ability to work with other sciences to improve life on mother earth. It is not intended to be an ending but rather a beginning of a process designed to recreate the science. The perspective in this paper is only one, and there is recognition that there are multiple voices, all that are needed to promote healing.

A paradigm shift is needed in psychology to increase its relevance to address the many new global challenges we face. Indigenous values align well with what has been learned by scientists about creation and humanity's place in creation. Sharing the light from our sacred fires will help to heal the trauma of the past, not only for Indigenous people but also for all others. I humbly propose a number of suggestions to begin the conversation about how Indigenous people can share the light of the sacred fires to promote healing to all of creation through improving psychological science and its interventions on human behavior.

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