

Four Principles for Cultivating Alternate Cultural Paradigms in Psychology: Summary Reflections on Innovative Contributions

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Abstract

The contributors to this special issue have demonstrated the potency and promise of cultivating Alternate Cultural Paradigms (ACPs) in psychology that reflect and express the lived realities of non-White communities in America. Based on my past research engagement with several distinct American Indian and First Nations communities, I offer for consideration four principles for psychologists who seek to further cultivate ACPs: (a) attend independently to culture and power, (b) anchor conceptual abstractions in empirical examples, (c) complicate stock oppositions and essentialisms, and (d) integrate emancipation with application. Adoption of these four principles should assist with the development of robust ACPs that accurately reflect the lived experiences of non-White communities. The promotion of these in psychology represents the exciting possibility for a more just and equitable future in which the injuries of White racism are remedied and all Americans are granted equal opportunities to live and thrive in self-determined fashion.

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In his 1969 Presidential Address to the American Psychological Association, George Miller famously called upon the profession to “give psychology away” (Miller, 1969, p. 1071). Today, many members of the Ethnic Acknowledging Psychological Associations (EAPAs) in the United States—including the contributors to this special issue—might well retort: “Who among us would want it, in its present state?” In this special issue of the *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, representatives from each of the five EAPAs review and reflect on alternate cultural paradigms (ACPs) in psychology that emerge from and engage with the lived realities and experiences of Indigenous, Black, Latinx, Asian, and Arab/Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) American communities and populations. While these constituencies are exceedingly diverse, what binds them together is their historical and/or contemporary racialization as non-White people in America. That is, each of these descent communities has contended with Euro-American racism in its myriad forms, including dispossession, denigration, exploitation, and marginality. As a racial project, the U.S. nation-state was founded on stolen African labor and stolen Indigenous land. Non-White immigrants to the United States built this nation even as they were denied the full fruits of citizenship and access to the American dream. This pervasive legacy of Euro-American dominance has produced pain and harm in non-White communities, especially as advantages for White Americans were “baked in” to societal laws and norms. In consequence, many White people in the United States are unable to recognize the exclusive and unjust advantages of being White in America; indeed, ignorance of unmerited racial privilege has long been enabled in White America (Mills, 2007). The widely publicized murder of George Floyd in 2020 helped to inaugurate a period of racial reckoning in the United States, in which broader acknowledgment of structural racism has occurred. It remains to be seen whether and to what degree the systems and structures that maintain and express White racial privilege might be actively dismantled.

As an academic discipline and applied profession, American psychology has taken shape during the past 140 years in ways that reflect and reinforce dominant societal trends. For example, many early psychologists were proponents of eugenics, advocating for measuring, identifying, and sorting people with respect to desirable inherited attributes (e.g., intelligence) and recommending restrictions on reproduction for those deemed inferior (including,

unsurprisingly, non-White populations; Helms, 2012). Beyond this, for most of its history, American psychology produced knowledge based on samples drawn from Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic societies—including high proportions of university students—even while promoting such findings as universally applicable to humankind (Henrich et al., 2010). Moreover, academic psychology has long suffered from physics-envy (Howell et al., 2014), and the discipline's pursuit of status as a bona fide science has ensured that its favored practices of knowledge production—such as correlational and experimental methods (Cronbach, 1957)—entail pervasive and consequential decontextualization and reductionism. Finally, professional psychology pursued status through clinical contributions to health systems and services that seek to treat patients with medical conditions rather than to harness the energy and expertise of local partners as systems-change agents for promoting well-being and preventing dysfunction in their own communities (Albee, 1986; Sarason, 1981). These commitments—and more besides—help to account for why so many non-White psychologists have expressed dismay, dissatisfaction, and even dismissal of disciplinary knowledge and professional practice. Instead, some representatives of these constituencies seek to build alternate foundations of psychological expertise that are better suited for diverse cultural realities and reparative—even emancipatory—initiatives.

As demonstrated by this special issue, the result has been a spirited cultivation of ACPs by non-White psychologists. Consoli and Myers (this issue) outlined four attributes of ACPs. Specifically, ACPs: (a) depend on assumptions consistent with a particular cultural frame of reference, (b) respect the lived experience and cultural strengths of a given community, (c) expand disciplinary knowledge production beyond dominant “Western” perspectives, and (d) appreciate the contributions to coherent general psychological knowledge from multiple cultural communities. Each of the articles in this issue engages these attributes in different ways. Myers, together with her colleagues (this issue), summarized a career's investment in developing an *emic* African psychology that draws on “the African Grand Narrative” to center Spirit, emphasize communalism, and champion Black liberation from racist societal regimes and hegemonic Eurowestern psychology. Consoli and colleagues (this issue) thematically analyzed 33 sources identified by 50 members of the National Latinx Psychological Association to demonstrate the importance for Latinx psychology of combating Latinx oppression and inequities, acknowledging culture-specific Latinx values, and engaging in treatments that have been culturally adapted for Latinx people. Blume (this issue) championed an Indigenous worldview—grounded in a holistic system of co-equal partners—that diverges from the mainstream emphasis on independence, autonomy, and hierarchy, which pervades society and psychology to the detriment of both the human and natural worlds. Yoo and colleagues (this

issue) applied Asian Critical Race Theory to Asian American Psychology to unpack the striking and nuanced implications of racialization for these communities beyond the disciplinarily familiar concern with cultural traditions, customs, and values. Finally, Awad and colleagues (this issue) review the commonalities among Arab/MENA Americans that give rise to particular psychological concerns such as identity, recognition, discrimination, trauma, acculturation, and cultural values.

My entire career as an academic psychologist with applied interests has centered on exploring commonalities and distinctions between the concepts, categories, principles, and practices of modern professional psychology and Indigenous community well-being (APA Award for Distinguished Professional Contributions to Applied Research: Joseph Patrick Gone, in press). Specifically, in response to American Indian and First Nations community engagement, I have endeavored to explicate with reference to some constituencies within these settings certain local construals of mind and mentality (i.e., ethnopsychological investigations), convergences and divergences of these with respect to stock professional knowledge (i.e., assessments of cultural commensurability), and the creation and recognition of alternate programs and interventions in response (i.e., therapeutic innovations). This endeavor is necessarily attentive to cultural diversity, colonial legacies, and power asymmetries, and in fact reveals an alter-Native psy-ence in which Indigenous formulations of disorder, well-being, treatment, and evaluation contest and recast the assumptions and orientations of professional psychology (Gone, in press). I am uncertain whether this alter-Native psy-ence qualifies as a bona fide ACP (in part because the rampant diversity of “Indian Country” is better captured by shared resistance to dominant professional commitments than by any overarching unity among alternate perspectives), but I have no doubt that it shares in the aspirations, analyses, and ardor that have yielded ACPs. Thus, based on my past research engagement with several distinct Indigenous communities, I offer for consideration in the remainder of this brief commentary four principles for psychologists who seek to further cultivate ACPs: (a) attend independently to culture and power, (b) anchor conceptual abstractions in empirical examples, (c) complicate stock oppositions and essentialisms, and (d) integrate emancipation with application. Adoption of these four principles should assist with the development of robust ACPs that accurately reflect the lived experiences of non-White communities and effectively withstand the critiques of skeptical colleagues.

My first principle for cultivating robust ACPs is to *attend independently to culture and power*. Culture refers to the dynamic repertoire of meanings, tools, and practices that humans are socialized into by virtue of participation in social life. Power refers to the ability and capacity to enact or accomplish

something that is desired. As racialized populations, non-White constituencies in America have experienced long-standing processes of subjugation of our distinctive cultural practices that have been deemed inferior to the norms and standards of Euro-American society. For example, for the Indigenous communities with which I partner, it was the policy of the U.S. federal government for roughly five decades to compel Native children to attend industrial boarding schools designed to assimilate these youths into the lower socioeconomic strata of American society. Indigenous languages and cultural practices were expressly forbidden in these schools to effectively Christianize and “civilize” these supposedly primitive populations (Adams, 1995). In response, American Indian communities today seek to resist the settler-colonial erasure of our ways of life by reclaiming and revitalizing Indigenous languages and cultural traditions. Doing so is an expression of anti-colonial resistance and empowerment. But culture emerges from collective adaptations to contemporary circumstances, and modern American Indian life is dramatically different from that of our pre-reservation ancestors. Unsurprisingly, American Indian communities have adopted and adapted a whole host of modern tools and technologies from Euro-American settlers in pursuit of better lives for our peoples. Thus, the path to a better future is not always marked by culture (i.e., Indigenous tradition) but rather by power (i.e., agentic self-determination). Both are important for most racialized communities. But recognition of the separability of culture and power—and treating them independently in the cultivation of ACPs—can remedy the presumption that the self-determined adoption of *exogenous* cultural practices is somehow less authentic or legitimate than adhering to community traditions (which themselves can run afoul of modern sensitivities to power asymmetries relative to gender equity, religious pluralism, human rights, etc.).

My second principle for cultivating robust ACPs is to *anchor conceptual abstractions in empirical examples*. It is perhaps obvious that the delineation of ACPs necessarily requires abstract characterization of general patterns, preferences, and practices across some broader swath of people and their communities. Indeed, it is often noted in psychology that each individual human person is simultaneously like every other human being, like some other human beings, and like no other human being; presumably, the cultivation of ACPs takes shape in the middle domain of commonalities that are widely shared among a given racialized group. One domain that routinely features in ACPs in psychology across racialized groups is spirituality. As a high-order abstraction, participation in and commitment to profound spiritual convictions and experiences does indeed contrast with secularizing trends in modern American life. But at high orders of abstraction, we risk losing sight of the complex and nuanced ways that categories such as spirituality

are realized in individual lives. For example, epidemiological research has demonstrated that two reservation-based American Indian populations endorsed very high levels of religious participation, with nearly three quarters of respondents reporting at least occasional participation in Christian traditions (Garrouette et al., 2014). And yet, the higher order category of “Christian” can occlude recognition that American Indian Christians often differ from other Christian faith communities in marked ways. My own *Aaniiih*-Gros Ventre grandmother identified as Roman Catholic throughout her life, and yet her spiritual engagement and understanding defy breezy classification insofar as she recognized and endorsed principles of Indigenous spirituality as well (Gone, 1999; Gone, Miller, & Rappaport, 1999). My point here is that the abstractions and generalities that are necessary for cultivating ACPs need to be grounded in empirical examples if they are to preserve the complexity and nuance that distinguish the scholarly endeavor.

My third principle for cultivating robust ACPs is to *complicate stock oppositions and essentialisms*. Opposition refers to the use of binary contrasts to cast two concepts in sharp relief. Essentialism refers to the classificatory tendency to group like things together based on the presumption that certain latent, inherent, and consequential attributes account for their manifest similarities (and additional traits besides). An example that arises in my own domain of expertise is the routine opposition of the terms Western and Indigenous. The essentialism at work in this binary is the implication that ideas, people, and practices with origins that can be traced to Europe are fundamentally alike and, taken together, fundamentally different from the ideas, people, and practices with origins that can be traced to the so-called New World. While such oppositions can sometimes function as a form of conceptual shorthand or as a mobilization tactic for achieving political ends (i.e., “strategic essentialism”), higher order oppositions and essentialisms are nearly impossible to defend intellectually. The problem, of course, is that ideas, people, and practices travel, and in the process of circulation are refashioned, reconstituted, and redefined. Kwame Anthony Appiah, a Cambridge-educated philosopher with Asante heritage who was reared in Ghana, is perhaps perfectly positioned to consider these issues. In his analyses, he declared the idea of Western civilization a myth (Appiah, 2016) and various group identities (such as those based on race, class, culture, and nationality) “lies that bind” (Appiah, 2018). In fact, the reality is almost always complex, with Indigenous-identified psychologists often possessing more European ancestry than Indigenous ancestry and only earning our credentials after two decades of formal “Western” education. In sum, many of our most compelling oppositions and essentialisms are fictions. Our casual use of these as scholars both reifies inaccurate (and sometimes romanticized)

assertions and occludes nuanced (and sometimes unwelcome) understandings. We should instead aim to complicate these (e.g., by attending to Christian Indians) if we aspire to promote valid knowledge through the cultivation of ACPs.

My fourth principle for cultivating robust ACPs is to *integrate emancipation with application*. Emancipation refers to the pursuit of reparative and even liberatory outcomes with respect to legacies of subjugation and marginality, including racial oppression. Application refers to the practical exercise of psychological knowledge and professional skill for improving human lives and bettering the human condition. The challenge is that our emancipatory ambitions often imply radically alternate approaches that are simply incompatible with reigning professional conventions. In such circumstances, it is all too common for either the liberatory commitments to remain unrealized in terms of transformative outcomes on one hand, or for the tangible benefits of professional intervention to support individual adjustment to unjust social conditions on the other hand. Fortunately, health service psychology is not the only professional pathway in applied psychology. In contrast to clinical application and psychotherapeutic practice, community psychology has long championed an alternate approach to action-research that engages local partners in participatory fashion toward solving their own problems on their own terms (Kloos et al., 2020). For example, in two of my prior collaborations with Indigenous partners, we designed and implemented novel programs for remedying addiction (through the Blackfeet Culture Camp; see Gone & Calf Looking, 2015) and promoting Indigenous spiritual practices (through the Urban American Indian Traditional Spirituality Program; see Gone et al., 2020) in service to greater health equity. Both programs depended on the emancipatory insight that many American Indian traditions consider long-subjugated ceremonial practices as inextricably linked to robust health, and that programs for remedying post-colonial pathologies such as addiction, trauma, and suicide can draw on these ritual traditions in applied fashion. Identifying and deploying emancipatory commitments through professional application should productively enhance the value of cultivating ACPs.

In conclusion, the contributors to this special issue have demonstrated the potency and promise of cultivating ACPs in psychology that reflect and express the lived realities and experiences of non-White communities in America. For too long, the racialized members of these communities have been systematically denied full and fair access to the benefits and opportunities afforded to White Americans. As an American institution, psychology in the United States has privileged the perspectives and concerns of White America. The promotion of ACPs in psychology thus represents the exciting possibility for a more just and equitable future in which the injuries of White

racism are remedied and all Americans are granted equal opportunities to live and thrive as they and their communities decide in diverse but self-determined fashion.

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