A Review of

Mental Health Care for Urban Indians: Clinical Insights From Native Practitioners
by Tawa M. Witko (Ed.)
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Reviewed by

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It is no secret that Native Americans have suffered a history of genocide that remains unparalleled, not only in the United States but throughout the world. For many of us, however, the details of their struggle remain buried, as the true story is rarely told in educational settings or history books (Churchill, 2005). Although the multicultural movement within the field of psychology continues to do much to give voice to those who have historically remained unheard and unnoticed, it remains true that there exists little published work with a focus on Native Americans. What has been written usually focuses on Indians residing on reservations, who reflect only a small number of the population, as 70 percent of Native Americans currently reside in urban areas (p. 48).

This edited volume by Witko changes that. With this highly informative and creative text, the authors have contributed enormously to the psychological research available on Native Americans, particularly those residing in urban areas. Although Witko acknowledges that the book is not comprehensive, the contents provide a wealth of information on each chapter's focus area and through reference sections that extensively cite previous work on Native Americans. We are also provided with several models, Web sites, and titles of other books that are relevant in this area. Furthermore, all authors are Native Americans, and their tribal affiliations are provided. This is powerful not only because of the importance of Native Americans speaking for themselves rather than others deciding what is best for them, but also because it demonstrates that mental health providers of Native American backgrounds do, in fact, exist. This is no small feat, considering the general absence of Native American representation in the general field of psychology. Overall, the authors have birthed a text that delivers far more than its title promises. It should be considered a gold standard for anyone interested in culturally competent mental health service delivery with Native Americans and for the multicultural movement in general.

The book begins with a preface by Witko in which we are given an insider's look into her personal story. She describes her experience in this field and the complete lack of representation Native Americans were given in her training program, even though she was in Los Angeles, "where there is the largest concentration of urban American Indians" (p. xi). This information is continued in the first chapter, in which Witko provides important statistics on the Native American population in the United States, both current and historical, and outlines the need for this kind of text. She explains that "many Indians raised in urban areas prefer to call themselves 'Native Americans,' whereas those raised on the reservation tend to call themselves 'American Indians'" (p.
10). We are also provided with traditional treatment modalities of various tribes as well as the experiences of urban Indians today. This chapter provides a foundational understanding of various concepts that educate readers and guides them through the rest of the book. Whether read as a review or for new information, this chapter is powerful and essential to understanding the rest of the book.

We are then taken to Part 1 of the text, which focuses on more detailed historical accounts related to Native Americans. Aragon’s chapter discusses the impact of a history of genocide on a people, making it very clear that the results continue to be devastating. It is also clear that Native Americans are an extremely diverse group with very little psychological research focusing on their unique issues. Although some work has been done with other groups on the intergenerational transmission of trauma, “the world has not acknowledged or studied the holocaust of Native American people in this hemisphere” (p. 23). Aragon makes it clear that “all Indian peoples were impacted by the conquest of this land” (p. 23) and that

even the sophisticated next generation of mental health professionals is not being provided with the appropriate training to enable them not to fall prey to some of the common stereotypes of American Indians as silent, angry, and lost victims in our society. (p. 25)

Several recommendations are given for clinicians working with these clients, as “counseling services designed around conventional individual therapy regimes are inappropriate for service delivery in Indian communities” (p. 25).

In the second chapter, Evans-Campbell discusses child welfare practice with Native communities. She makes the point that the rate of child maltreatment among American Indian children is the second highest in the country at 21.3 cases per 1,000 (p. 33). However, there are likely several reasons for this, including intergenerational trauma, various socioeconomic factors, and lack of cultural competence in determining what constitutes maltreatment among these communities. Evans-Campbell places this in historical context, given the Civilization Fund Act of 1819, in which countless American Indian children were taken to institutions designed to force them to learn Western mannerisms and the English language. Although these schools were closed after the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934 and the Indian Child Welfare Act of 1978 gave tribes authority over their own children, “Native children remain heavily overrepresented in the child welfare system. They enter younger, stay longer, and all too often are placed in non-Native facilities that remove them from their cultural heritage and identity” (p. 49). In general, resources remain poor for implementing the Indian Child Welfare Act, and many of the judges, lawyers, and social workers who work in child welfare are unfamiliar with it.

The final chapter of the first section is an eloquent, articulate, thought-provoking work focusing on identity among American Indians. Gone provides several identity models and offers thoughtful analyses of the complexity of “authentic” Indian identity throughout history, “given the centrality of identity to wellness among American Indian people” (p. 57). He makes the point that “instead of carefully considered and creatively selected citizenship criteria,... most tribes continue to endorse a variant of the standard colonial theme: blood quantum or racial purity” (p. 60). The dimensional models he provides “represent an alternative to the untenable ideology of racial purity” (p. 63), and the discursive models acknowledge that “Indian identities are historical products of enduring social structures that are both powerful and pervasive” (p. 65), resulting in a variety of identities, even within the same tribe.

Gone gives a brief background of several very interesting models that are different from the linear ones we are most used to in psychology, leaving us with an elegant and poignant understanding of the complexity of identity in American Indian communities. He concludes the chapter with several recommendations for mental health clinicians, making clear the point that to a people who were nearly obliterated, identity has a very different meaning than for any other group in the United States. In Gone’s words,
I hope that together, knowledgeable and sensitive professionals in service to resilient Indian communities can bind up the wounds of colonialism and chart the course for a new era of wellness and self-determined authenticity in the lived identities of urban American Indians. (p. 76)

His innovative thinking and beautiful writing certainly provide hope for all wishing to do just that.

Part 2 of the book focuses on specific treatment issues in the Native American community, specifically among urban populations. In chapter 4, Clark focuses on alcohol and drug abuse, one of the most common topics of research with this population. She provides statistics in cultural and historical context before sharing barriers to effective treatment in urban areas and limitations in the available research. The reader is given a solid understanding of the relevant issues regarding substance use among Native communities, as well as the need for much more quality data in this area.

In the fifth chapter, Witko, Martinez, and Milda focus on domestic violence. They provide general information in a historical context, including the impact of colonization, boarding schools, and relocation to urban areas. These data help the reader understand the complexity of violence within the American Indian community, as this will help inform better treatment interventions. Several programs are illustrated, including those developed by Cangleska, Inc. (e.g., Smoke Signals, Sacred Circle) and Native Pathways to Healing. The authors also give information on a wealth of ideas to consider for the creation of other successful programs, drawing on the work that has come before.

The final chapter in this section focuses on intergenerational trauma, which Cole describes as “exposure of an earlier generation to a traumatic event that continues to affect the subsequent generations” (p. 115). Although the mechanisms by which trauma is transmitted remain unclear, she provides us with an overview of the research on Jewish Holocaust survivors, Japanese American internees, and other sufferers of complex posttraumatic stress disorder. She discusses the difficulty in conducting research of this kind with Native Americans, including the amount of time that has passed since the original traumatic event(s), the vast differences among tribes, and the difficulty in accessing urban Indian populations. Cole discusses effects on the tribe, the family, and the individual according to a trauma model proposed by Duran, Duran, and Brave Heart (p. 122). She ends the chapter with several recommendations for treatment, which are a great example of culturally relevant approaches for any clinician working with Native American clients.

The third and final section of the book focuses on new directions when working with Native Americans in urban settings. In chapter 7, BigFoot and Dunlap focus on storytelling as a healing modality. They provide information on several Web sites containing relevant information in this regard (see p. 135), as well as examples of the ways in which stories may be used with children and adolescents. With chapter 8, Witko provides a framework for helping Native Americans rediscover traditional parenting styles, a summary of which may be found in Table 8.1 (p. 166). In chapter 9, Clark and Witko discuss treatment with Indian adolescents, including youth camps, group exercises, and individual and family therapy modalities that they will find relevant. The unique identity issues that allow Indian adolescents “to heal from the wounds of their ancestors and to find ways to rejuvenate themselves as Indian people are considered throughout the chapter. This rejuvenation translates into positive mental health functioning of the adolescents involved” (p. 184).

In chapter 10, Johnson uses the medicine wheel to empower urban Indians. This is a community healing model for children, families, and communities designed to help overcome multigenerational trauma. The model is outlined in Figure 10.1 (p. 190). Within this section, the reader is provided with a plethora of treatment modalities that may be used with a group of people who are not typically well served by Western psychological methods. The book ends with a conclusion from Witko, outlining the contributions from all of the authors. She gives several questions for non-Indians to consider (p. 209) if they wish to work effectively with this diverse group, as well as several titles currently available that offer more insight into the urban Indian experience.
With this text, the authors have successfully continued what Native American people have been demonstrating ever since North America was “found” by Columbus: resilience and ingenuity. Their work demonstrates a return to the natural way of things, this time with the incorporation of those Western treatment models that may add to the picture, if used sensitively. The recommendations provided herein represent the essence of cultural competence and respect for traditional culture(s). We should all be thankful that this book exists, for it sheds light not only on how to work more effectively with Native Americans residing in urban areas, but also on how to respect the backgrounds of all our clients. In Witko’s words,

It is hoped that through this book, readers will be encouraged to ask questions that will lead to further research and, in turn, a better understanding of how psychologists can incorporate the best of psychology with what tribal traditions encourage. (p. 211)

Reference