



Renee Linklater, Decolonizing Trauma Work: Indigenous Stories and Strategies

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Who We (Reviewers) Are

The reviewers are Native American descendant dance/movement therapists who believe in the power of dance for ritual, ceremony and healing. As members of the Multicultural and Diversity Committee (MDC) Native American Affinity Group (NAAG), they understand the importance of decolonizing the therapeutic use of dance and de-centering Whiteness as the primary therapeutic process. In an effort to increase education and growth regarding their own indigenous identity, NAAG developed a monthly reading and discussion group for ADTA members, family and friends. In hopes of honoring indigenous influences on the use of dance as therapy, the review of this book provides a good foundational place to begin conversations about decolonizing centuries of trauma, misappropriation and erasure of indigenous culture. Our hope is that others who strive for growth in similar areas will come away not only wanting to invest the time in the enriching, thought-provoking 175 pages of this book, but come away asking, “How can we further decolonize mental health?”

History on Why This Subject is Important

Since early colonization of North America, there have been laws and bans in place that have prohibited the cultural healing and religious practices of Native Americans (US) and First Nations (Canada) in addition to other cultural beliefs, norms

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and practices. *Decolonizing Trauma Work* provides a framework and focus on the traumatic effects of those laws and bans on the psyche and mental health of Indigenous people then and now. The foundation of trauma work in the United States has a westernized approach that does not necessarily adapt to cross cultural needs and ways of being. Common treatment for addressing trauma includes exposure therapy, cognitive-behavior therapy and dialectical behavior therapy which does not take into account the personal identity factors of the person (e.g. culture, spirituality, gender, etc.) (Bicknell-Hentges and Lynch, 2009). Particular to the education and clinical practice of dance/movement therapy, de-centering whiteness in the use of dance as a therapeutic means to address trauma experienced by Indigenous people socially, emotionally, mentally, spiritually and physically is crucial to the efforts of being diverse and inclusive. By increasing awareness, knowledge and education to include indigenous healing practices for clinical application, dance/movement therapists would be well positioned in creating an equitable sustainable profession.

How Could this Information Help? Application Outcomes

Trauma informed work as well as strengths-based perspectives are currently the focus of mental health treatment in American society with the prevalence of traumatic events occurring in childhood that tend to manifest in adulthood in various ways. While it is timely that more research, education and treatment is being focused on the effects of trauma, most assessments and interventions are heavily based in Western culture with little attention or acknowledgment of how culture informs healing.

Major Takeaways/Principle Ideas

Linklater suitably points out the necessity of decentering Whiteness and diversifying knowledge particularly in the medical and mental health professions. She expressed the need to recognize the traumatic impact of colonization in regards to how psychiatry and psychology tends to label the person as pathological rather than attributing it to the process or the system which traumatized the person which oftentimes perpetuates additional trauma. Additionally, she points out that psychiatric medications do not address or cure poverty, homelessness, isolation, or loneliness, as this truth must be kept in perspective when treating a client from a cultural holistic approach.

Linklater purports that the idea of culturally inclusive treatment at this time seems to entail taking a European based theory or premise and attempting to make it as culturally diverse as possible. A question to ponder in this instance is, “When the foundation is still steeped in Whiteness can this truly be inclusive?” A more inclusive proposal would include collaborative participatory research that centers Indigenous ways of knowing and healing making space for Indigenous research and theories to be developed which center Native voices and ways of knowing.

Goals of the Book

This book highlights the need to question mainstream disciplines of psychiatry and psychology and their bias influences on healing and wellness in Indigenous communities. In regards to health and healing, this book promotes the need for community control and self-determination in Indigenous communities. Furthermore, the book outlines strategies for decolonizing trauma work through process and specific examples shared by Indigenous health care practitioners. A key aspect is the focus on questioning the mainstream medical model of clinical diagnoses and treatment as it impacts funding, program development, and training design. There is also acknowledgment of the lack of Indigenous paradigms and theory in the educational and professional clinical setting as Linklater alludes that post-secondary programs largely based on Western constructs do not adequately integrate Indigenous knowledge. A more subtle goal of the book is to re-evaluate research in areas of decolonization. Consequently, Linklater references Hart (2008) who determined, “There should be no need for us to constantly justify, validate or change our work in order to fit foreign research paradigms. We have our own standards and beliefs that we uphold.”

Background of the Author

As a member of Rainy River First Nations in Northwestern Ontario, Linklater has 20 years of experience working with Indigenous healing agencies. She has worked across the health and education sectors as a frontline worker, program evaluator, curriculum developer, and educator/trainer.

Structure of the Book

The structure of *Decolonizing Trauma Work* supports the Indigenous tradition of preservation through storytelling by engaging ten Indigenous health care practitioners in meaningful dialogue. From various perspectives of mental health (psychiatry, psychology, nursing and social work) they each explore healing and wellness in Indigenous communities on Turtle Island (North American continent). Powerful and insightful narratives regarding Indigenous worldviews, notions of wellness and wholistic health, critiques of psychiatry and psychiatric diagnoses, and Indigenous approaches to helping people through trauma, depression and experiences of parallel and multiple realities are revealed through client case examples of Indigenous healing in action.

Structure Explained

This book brilliantly breaks down the subject into six main chapters that addresses the intergenerational and multigenerational trauma of Indigenous people due to colonization. The first chapter, *Colonialism, Indigenous Trauma and Healing*, sets the

tone for the book by providing a historical perspective of life pre and post colonization as well as introducing key terms to describe the effects of trauma on the Indigenous population. The second chapter, *Indigenous Health Care Practitioners Join the Circle*, introduces the ten culturally and clinically competent Indigenous health care practitioners who share their experiences working with Indigenous clients of different ages and communities in various health care settings.

The remaining chapters build on the themes of the conversations that Linklater discovered while reviewing the narratives of the health care practitioners. The third chapter, *Indigenous Perspectives on Wellness and Wholistic Healing*, outlines four broad themes of wellness. These include: (1) balance and harmony—depicting the core of wellness as the Spirit; (2) being in Creation—identifying that everything is connected; (3) care and compassion—focusing on self-care first; and (4) community challenges for wellness—resistance to bringing back traditional methods. The fourth chapter, *Psychiatry and Indigenous Peoples*, addresses the issue of psychiatry despite its aim to identify and treat mental disorders often results in pathologizing the experiences of Indigenous people who may be responding to the effects of colonization. For this reason, the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Health Disorders (DSM) diagnoses are used with caution as the diagnoses may not adequately reflect what is being experienced. The fifth chapter, *Indigenous Strategies for Helping and Healing*, re-establishes the importance of connections to culture through Indigenous strategies for helping and healing by supporting individuals, families and communities. As a result of colonization, Indigenous people have lived in a multi-traumatic existence meaning that the trauma is personal, collective and historical; therefore, Indigenous healing practices of prayer, spiritual connection, love and relationship are vital to recovery. In the final chapter, *A Decolonizing Journey*, Linklater proposes that there are several significant considerations for education and training programs, health care practitioners, healing centers, clinical services and policy initiatives. She concluded that there may be resistance to adapting to Native practices from medical model policy makers who heavily rely on Western culture, funding sources and pharmaceutical solutions without considering the need for consistency between policy makers and policy enforcers.

How it relates to the DMT field

At a basic fundamental level, dance/movement therapy looks to and assesses the connection or disconnect between body and mind. Often in Western psychiatry one truth is held to be right; however, this book provides vignettes which highlights the need for dance/movement therapists to make space for multiple truths. When examining the idea of “body memory” or “blood memory,” the number of story lines coursing through an individual’s veins is awe-inspiring, not to mention the innumerable truths which may be pulsing through a community. By using movement as a means to facilitate release of the traumatic body memories caused by colonization, dance/movements therapists can create healing spaces for Indigenous people to reconnect with the parts of themselves that have been whitewashed.

Linklater touches on the premise of “wholeness” for many Indigenous people being the connection of body, mind, language, community, and spirit. She references Ermine (1995) who supports this way of being by acknowledging, “In their quest to find meaning in the outer space, Aboriginal people turned to the inner space. This inner space is that universe of being within each person that is synonymous with the soul, the spirit, the self, or the being.” While those aspects of identity are also important in dance/movement therapy work, it is equally important to note that for certain groups of people, the connection with all or most of those “wholistic” components is of extreme significance. Expanding the notion of “body-mind” connection could be a useful tool when working on widening cultural lenses within the scope of dance/movement therapy work.

For example, a primary tenet of dance/movement therapy practice is being aware of and acknowledging a heightened sense of the therapist’s kinesthetic empathy. This concept is in direct alignment with the Indigenous belief and practice that everything is connected. If dance/movement therapists were to incorporate an Indigenous view of healing, the importance of honoring the client’s experience of self mentally, emotionally, physically and spiritually would provide opportunities for more inclusive dynamic therapeutic processing. Working from the clients’ worldview rather than the therapists’ worldview also provides opportunities to decolonize treatment in favor of healing through cultural means rather than scientific based treatment. Subsequently, dance/movement therapists might ask themselves, “Are we honoring the client’s ability to have experiences that are not necessarily scientifically explained or are we pathologizing it?”

How the Book Could be Used Educationally in the DMT World

Dance/movement therapy leans heavily on collectivist ideologies and practices without presenting collectivist cultures in an adequate manner in the current required texts. *Decolonizing Trauma Work* begins to bridge the gap between what we are practicing and why we are practicing it.

The history and culture of Indigenous people as it relates to healing trauma and spiritual aspects of dance as a therapeutic artform provides meaningful context for the teaching and clinical practice of dance/movement therapy. The inclusion of books such as *Decolonizing Trauma Work* on the required reading list for educational programs, cultural competency courses and continuing education would expand the body of knowledge for dance/movement therapists beyond Eurocentric viewpoints of the therapeutic use of dance.

Diversifying authors, stories, and experiences used within dance/movement therapy education will benefit the continued education of members in the field, faculty in dance/movement therapy programs, dance/movement therapy students who share these diverse and overlapping identities, and the clients served. Academic tools and resources for mental health practitioners, such as diagnostic manuals, are continuously evolving; they adapt with changes in our current societal structures, as well as with new understandings of historical evidence. Including books like *Decolonizing*

Trauma Work as required educational material, helps to inform and reframe our healing, treatment, and evaluation practices.

World Placement

Our identities inform all aspects of our experiences, including our work. This could be seen when some of the Indigenous health care practitioners shared their experiences with Linklater. The health care practitioners discussed how they often found success in blending their academic tools gained in higher education and their spiritual knowledge and practice. This draws upon the notion that non-White mental health professionals grow up understanding and experiencing multiculturalism. They grow up in one culture while learning about the dominant, normative culture, and both can inform their work successfully. *Decolonizing Trauma Work* speaks to the responsibility of health care practitioners who are part of the normative culture, that could benefit from expanding their cultural understandings and the historical importance of decolonizing aspects of the mental health field, to be better equipped by educating themselves and committing to practice from a culturally aware standpoint.

Acknowledgement We thank the author for her book, *Decolonizing Trauma Work*, and believe the work supports the dance/movement therapy field in both its content and call to action for mental health professionals to decenter whiteness and Western influences in diagnosing and treating trauma. We appreciate the opportunity to reinforce the necessity of diverse and inclusive education regarding colonized communities and how dance/movement therapists are uniquely positioned as body-based therapists to facilitate mental, emotional, physical and spiritual well-being.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

Ethical Approval This article does not contain any studies with human participants or animals performed by any of the authors.

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on the Texas chapter board for four years and founded the Native American Affinity Group as part of the Multicultural Diversity Committee of the ADTA.

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Wesley Johnson-Klein *R-DMT*, is a dance/movement therapist working in Valhalla, New York. Wesley completed her M.S. in Dance/Movement Therapy at Sarah Lawrence College in 2017. She has worked with the geriatric and aging populations for the past 3 years. Wesley is the Director of Creative Arts Therapy at a skilled nursing facility and rehabilitation center where she works with residents and patients who have physical, neuro-cognitive, personality, developmental, and emotional disabilities and diagnoses. Being of Cherokee descent, Wesley strives to use her opportunities to encourage re-examination of the systemic racial structures we live in and their relationships to mental health.

Amanda Williams *R-DMT*, is a dance/movement therapist in Tulsa, Oklahoma. She is a member of the Choctaw Nation. Amanda recently graduated from Drexel University where she completed and presented her culminating project regarding the provider and patient relationships of Native Americans in healthcare settings. She is passionate about the use of dance/movement as a vital avenue of healing and connection with self and community.